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ABSTRACT

Arranged in chronological order, this collection of papers explores the process involved in teaching expository writing in order to stimulate discussion, provoke comment and criticism, and provide the insights and information needed to develop a writing skills program. Much of the collection was written by persons with no direct experience in teaching expository writing: a university chancellor discusses the low writing skills among students entering his university and calls for articulation between the high school and both the college and the business world; a foundation executive voices concern for two educational programs that are jeopardized by the inability of students to write expository prose; a foreign correspondent notes that as the United States work force becomes more involved with information storage, it becomes more inept in the use of the written word; and a university dean stresses the need for teaching writing skills to students in science and engineering. The collection also contains a foundation response to one of the participants, the foundation's interim report on the problem of teaching expository writing, and reactions to the papers from experienced school teachers. (HAI)

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# *The Teaching of Expository Writing*

## AN EXCHANGE OF VIEWS

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An Occasional Paper from the Alfred P. Sloan Foundation

James D. Koerner, Editor

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*The editor, James D. Koerner, is a program officer of the Alfred P. Sloan Foundation.*

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# *Foreword*

In substance and in form, this Occasional Paper is a departure for the Alfred P. Sloan Foundation. Dealing with the teaching of expository writing, it broaches a subject in which the Foundation has shown no earlier interest and can proclaim no particular qualifications. Unlike other Occasional Papers, it is a collection of work by several hands, all of it tracing a process of exploration rather than recording the results of a Foundation program or activity. Indeed, it should be looked upon as a part of that process of exploration, for its main purpose is to stimulate discussion, provoke comment and criticism, and help provide the Foundation with the further information and insights it needs if it is to undertake any kind of program in writing skills.

Much of the paper has been prepared by persons who themselves have no direct experience in the teaching of expository writing: a university chancellor with a background in statistics; a foundation executive with a background in journalism; a foreign journalist with a background in economics; a university dean with a background in political science. After these have had their say, generally tendentious and even at times outrageous, space is allotted to several experts in the field, who proceed to agree and disagree with much that has gone before.

Yet the four interlopers have reason to speak out. Their allegations may be unsupported and their solutions impractical, but their problems are real enough. The chancellor, presiding over one of the world's leading universities, is each year distressed by the low state of writing skills among his matriculants; the foundation executive is advised that two of the educational programs in which his foundation is most deeply engaged are in some degree jeopardized by the inability of students to write lucid and cogent exposi-



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tory prose; the journalist notes that in an era when the American work force is engaged more and more in the storage and transmission of information, it becomes more and more inept in the use of the written word; the dean faces with new intensity in the coming years the unmastered task of teaching writing skills to the country's most able students in science and engineering. For all of them it may be imprudent to enter the arena, but it is not unreasonable.

For more than a year the staff of the Sloan Foundation has carried on discussions about the problem of student writing with a wide assortment of people: teachers of English in public and private secondary schools, school administrators, college teachers of English, linguists, cognitive psychologists, university administrators, and textbook publishers. These persons have reinforced the Foundation's belief that American students, whether better or worse at expository writing than in the past, are unacceptably deficient now.

Whether the Sloan Foundation can do anything to help educators solve this problem is still not clear. What is clear is that the solutions of the past, such as summer institutes for high school teachers offered by college English departments and schools of education, or institutional campaigns to make everyone on the staff of a school or college responsible for the quality of student writing, have not worked. It is also clear that the customary explanations of the problem, blaming it on television, large classes, broken homes, student apathy, social malaise, or foreign policy, do not of themselves suggest solutions. Television is not going to go away, classes cannot be reduced in size to any great extent, the divorce rate may or may not change, and every generation of students must come to terms with the society of which it is a part even as it may try to change that society.

Something more radical than the solutions of the past seems to be called for—perhaps totally new devices in pedagogy, curriculum, and organization. But what devices? The Sloan Foundation is trying to find out, for it must decide whether to establish a program in expository writing. If such a program is established, it will be modest in size, limited in duration, and unconventional in approach. The Foundation, that is, will not enter this field unless it is persuaded that new, untried solutions to an old problem can be adequately developed and tested over a period of six or seven years and if successful will have a reasonable chance to spread.

The Foundation's staff would welcome comments and suggestions

from educators and laymen, and to that end is publishing this exchange of views. What follows is arranged in chronological order and constitutes a rough history of the evolution of an idea within the Foundation. Frequently it is through this kind of exchange that a new program is developed. These pieces were selected from many documents at the Foundation as a stimulant, possibly an irritant, but assuredly not as any sort of final or authoritative word. If this Occasional Paper provokes readers to reflect and reply, it will serve a useful purpose.

J.D.K.

December 1977

# I

# *Writing Skills and Institutional Articulation*

**Albert H. Bowker**

*This paper is adapted from a longer draft report prepared by Albert H. Bowker for the July, 1976 meeting of the Education Program Workshop at Aspen, Colorado. In his report he explored the problems of articulation between high school and college and between high school and employment, and discussed writing skills as the most important means of improving that articulation. It was this report that became the stimulus for the Sloan Foundation's exploration of the problems of student writing. Mr. Bowker is a mathematician, formerly chancellor of the City University of New York, and now chancellor of the University of California at Berkeley.*

As the experience of our earlier meeting at Aspen suggested, a paper on articulation between high school and college has turned out to be a difficult task. The literature on the subject is enormous. It may well be that the job of developing policies for articulation is one for professionals and that other people with a limited amount of time to follow the literature cannot comment very intelligently. I am somewhat discouraged after reviewing this literature on articulation by the uneasy feeling that I have overlooked several important conclusions, but I am equally discouraged by the feeling that I have not.

I entered upon this exercise with the belief that a national emphasis on the teaching of expository writing would be useful and practicable. This bias has emerged unscathed. Although specific national programs to improve articulation between high school and work and between high school and college are hard to formulate, I remain convinced that articulation would be greatly enhanced

were high school graduates to arrive at college with better skills than they have now in expository writing.

We may have underestimated the decline in writing skills in our earlier discussions at Aspen. Since then additional data concerning the drop in SAT scores have been published, and other evidence is now publicly available to document this decline. (Some evidence is not exactly public but is revealing, such as the increased costs that colleges and universities are reporting for remediation.) As a result, the decline is now attracting national attention and is increasingly seen as a matter of public policy to which a high priority should be assigned. My own view is that within the last year an avalanche of pressure for improvement in the basic skills of high school graduates, especially in expository writing, has developed. I think it is a sound conclusion that in today's climate, education will not recapture public confidence or enjoy increased financing until it does a better job of teaching basic skills. The problem for policy makers is to turn this admirable public concern to advantage and guide it in useful directions.

### *Reasons for the decline*

Why the decline has occurred is an important question, bearing as it does on what is to be done about the decline, but the question cannot be answered completely and certainly not to everybody's satisfaction. The causes that are usually cited, such as too much time spent before the television set or too permissive an atmosphere at school, I will not go into; we are all familiar with them. But I would stress that some social factors are clearly at work. Half the mothers of today's school children are employed, and a significant percentage of students come from single-parent homes. I am told there is evidence that single-parent homes do not decrease achievement, but I am skeptical; the weakening of the family as a social and educational force may be important. For many students, particularly those from single-parent homes, pressure from their peers may be far more influential than pressure from home. Then too, the increase in teen-age drug abuse, alcoholism, and violence indicates that some social pathology is involved in the present decline. We need to remind ourselves of such factors even though remedies may not be immediately available.

I find it hard to escape the conclusion that a goodly share of blame for the decline in writing skills lies in curriculum changes that school authorities have permitted, if not promoted, in the secondary school over the last ten years. English and other basic subjects appear to represent a smaller portion of the curriculum than formerly; and there is a suspicion that homework in general, and writing as a part of homework, are on the downslide. Student absenteeism also plays a part: retention of students in the high schools is up but regular daily attendance is down. In addition, it is widely believed that teachers in today's high schools are trained to teach literature and in consequence do not like to teach expository writing and are not very good at it.

I am further strengthened in my view that the high school may be the main problem by the fact that some improvement in basic literacy seems to have been realized in recent years in the elementary school. The great amount of attention that has been given since 1965 to the matter of basic literacy can be seen in many state programs and such major federal programs as the Right-to-Read project and Title One of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act. The basic literacy test administered by the National Assessment of Educational Progress, even though the level of performance required in this test is fairly low, shows definite improvement. Test scores have not decreased in the lowest grades (one through four) as they have up the line, suggesting that ESEA-Title One may have been effective in concentrating elementary school curricula on basic skills.

Some investigators raise questions about the persistence of reading gains among Title One students and suspect that disadvantaged students tend to lose skills over the summer vacation after taking the tests the previous May. Such measurements are complicated by the fact that it is almost impossible to maintain a pure control group in a public elementary school: special services provided for one group are hard to deny another. It would be instructive to trace these measured improvements over time to see how much retention there is. I would hope for a lot, of course—a statistician hates to fit a curve to two points. In any case, I suspect that the elementary schools are less a problem now in regard to basic skills than are the junior high and high schools, but I also recognize that such a judgment would not be universally shared.

### *Writing and the world of work*

Teachers and school administrators often decry the whole back-to-basics movement, as it is called. Some even deny the importance of basic skills for all students, claiming that in today's labor market such skills are not needed in a wide variety of jobs. Admittedly, adults can exist in this society with a minimum of writing skills, if they possess an ability to read. Unskilled and blue-collar work may not require skill in writing, and recreation and cultural habits may focus on television, sports events, and other visual experiences. But it seems to me there are real problems in letting the school system inadvertently, much less deliberately, decide on the basis of family background, economic status, race, or other factors who should learn to read but not learn to write. Individuals should have the right to elect another path for their lives from the one that might be assumed for them by schools.

Moreover, laymen if not educators seem to be in strong agreement that certain skills, particularly in writing and simple mathematics, are important for most classes of workers. The service sector of our economy is increasing; manufacturing continues to decrease. It is interesting to note that the reasons recently given by corporations for leaving New York City include, in addition to crime and taxes, the difficulty of finding people for clerical jobs who bring with them a minimum competence in basic skills.

So we cannot dismiss the role of the schools in preparing students for the world of work. Many thoughtful persons in education believe that the articulation between school and employment should be much closer than it is. There are, in fact, a great number of articulation devices in use: school-employer conferences and committees, career education projects without number, cooperative work-study programs, and the like, with both high schools and community colleges participating. But these devices are *ad hoc* and do not fit into any kind of national pattern.

The National Longitudinal Study data on the attitudes of 1972 high school graduates indicated relative satisfaction with their school preparation, with a higher percentage of vocational high school students expressing satisfaction than students with other kinds of preparation. None of the data, that is, show very clearly where the specific gaps are that need to be filled. But these comments come from graduates who were employed. The unemployed might have had very different answers.

Leading commentators on higher education, such as the members of the Carnegie Commission on Higher Education, believe that we would be better served if periods of work and study were interspersed. LaGuardia Community College and a few other institutions with massive cooperative education programs have been quite successful in combining work and study. But I do not see how this movement can be expanded in the present economic situation. College enrollments, to mention only one complication, are up this year, probably because the recession is driving people to school to seek higher credentials or at least to postpone entry into the labor market.

I do not take lightly the notion that students should have work experience, but some proposals seem to me ill-advised. The proposal, for instance, that we require two years of national service from every young person, partly to take the pressure off the labor force, is a hazardous one. It could lead to all kinds of social pathologies and undesirable consequences, and would further isolate the youth culture from the rest of society.

I am myself puzzled as to how high schools can pay more attention to job preparation. The idea of creating a number of artificial and non-paying jobs for high school students to give them experience in work does not seem to me practical. The task of uncovering a large number of part-time jobs for such students also seems to me very difficult. Admittedly, there is a question of equity here. I suppose that the average middle-class student in a moderately affluent or wealthy community has had an opportunity to work. In such communities there is a demand for inexpensive services, such as lawn mowing, snow shoveling, baby sitting, cleaning, painting, delivery of groceries and papers, etc. Although exact figures are not available, the great majority of students at a place like Berkeley have worked for money before they arrive and therefore know something about "the world of work." In fact, about 20 percent of the student body is employed part-time by the University. I suspect that, outside of child care, comparable opportunities may not exist in very low-income areas, and this may be a further way in which our society discriminates.

Prosperity and full employment are probably the real answer, not an increase in career education. A program for employing the unemployed would not lead to any great educational reforms but to a national commitment to full employment. If we cannot have

full employment, we should redouble our efforts to provide a high quality of education to the poor and the minorities so that they get a fair crack at those jobs that are available. The evidence still exists that the more education, the better the job, although the relative advantage of education is decreasing.

### *Testing for competence*

My conviction remains intact that the single most important step we can take to improve articulation between high school and work is to raise the level of achievement in basic subjects. I am certain that it is the most important step for minority students, a proposition with which minority parents are very likely to agree. A research group at Stanford has recently done some very interesting studies of all the high schools in San Francisco. They have concluded that a subtle form of racism exists in these schools. Black and other minority students get relatively good grades but are not really performing at a level to deserve them. The Asian and white students appear to be treated much more even-handedly. How widespread this phenomenon is, I cannot say.

Black parents themselves appear to want to be told the truth about the educational achievement of their children. They want opportunities for their children that were previously denied, but they do not want preferential grading and treatment. More and more black leaders are speaking to the necessity for achievement as a basis for success. Thus I believe it possible and desirable for there to be a national effort to raise high school graduation standards and college admissions standards at the better institutions, and for this to be done in careful cooperation with the black community.

The role of competency test in all these matters, as I indicated in my paper last summer, is central. A dramatic and recent development is the decision of many states and school boards to require for graduation from high school a passing grade in a test of basic competency in reading, mathematics, and in some places (not enough) in expository writing. New York State will require competency tests beginning with the graduating class of 1979. New York has had a few years of experimentation with such tests in various school districts around the state, including an inner-city system in Brooklyn. The belief is that most students can be taught to pass these basic competency tests. If they can be and if the tests

do what they are supposed to do, we are on the way to reform.

It has also been recommended that there be considerable testing during the course of the school year. One of the experiments financed by the New York State Education Department, again in Brooklyn, gives tests in mathematics every two weeks. The results are readily available to both teachers and students, and information is continuously at hand regarding each student's progress. This district has reported steady improvement in math scores in comparison with the rest of the state. New York State will continue to develop tests in other subjects, possibly including expository writing, and is planning a comprehensive testing program both as a requirement for graduation from high schools and as an aid to teachers during the course of the year.

The question of increased testing and its impact on minorities is a delicate problem. The New York Regents believe all students can be brought up to the standards of their new tests, and these tests have been tried successfully in heavily minority school districts. Thus they should not restrict access to higher education, although this possibility should be watched.

Whatever the benefits of increased testing of basic skills, we continue to agree, I trust, as we did last year, that the federal government should maintain a hands-off position. It should continue to monitor the performance of the educational system through the National Assessment of Educational Progress, and perhaps should add to this an effort to report on the results of various state and local testing programs. But it should not attempt to define or impose any sort of national test or curriculum.

### *Standards for college admission*

There remains the question of college admissions and the standards that should be set in expository writing for incoming students. That these standards should be higher than they are, certainly in the leading institutions, is accepted by just about everybody. I asked a representative sample of the Berkeley faculty what educational benefits would accrue to the campus as a consequence of our admitting only students "fully prepared in English," as we like to put it. A mathematician was most enthusiastic, explaining that mathematics involves the translation of phenomena into precise language and that precision in the use of the English language is highly correlated with mathematical ability. A social scientist

echoed this theme: "Precision in writing clearly accompanies precision in thinking, and that is something the social sciences could use more of." Strong endorsement came from the language departments because students who are poorly prepared in English tend to do poorly in foreign languages.

Most of the faculty members I consulted complained about the time they had to spend correcting their students' compositions rather than teaching the subject they were supposed to teach. The estimate of the deans I consulted was that the material covered in a Berkeley education could be increased by half an academic year if students were adequately prepared in English composition. In addition, all materials covered in the curriculum could be handled at a higher level of intellectual sophistication, and the result would be a student body noticeably superior to the present one.

But college faculties are not consistent in this matter. On the one hand, there is a strong consensus among college teachers that the decline in writing standards in the high schools is extraordinarily undesirable. Instead of insisting on a higher standard of admission, however, they increase their efforts at remediation to correct these deficiencies. Other factors also work against a tightening of admissions standards. Open-access community colleges by definition take the student as they find him, and four-year institutions for their part are acutely aware of the decreasing number of 18-year-olds in the population and of the threat that inheres in that demographic fact. There is also a concern that raising admissions standards, even if desirable, might be harder on poor and minority students than on the middle class. Even so, there is increased criticism of remedial courses and non-credit work in the colleges, including the community colleges.

Thus college faculties (and I guess it is not news) find it hard to agree on a policy about expository writing. Nonetheless, it is clear to me that colleges owe the high schools a clear statement concerning the preparation they expect. The standard curriculum outlined by James Bryant Conant twenty years ago in his book on the American high school is about what the colleges should push for today. His book caused a stir when it appeared but in retrospect has not had a great deal of influence. Personally I think the curriculum he specifies for the talented student should apply, with appropriate modifications, to a much broader range of students, and that in a subject as important as expository writing, the school

should set a firm, publicly announced standard to be achieved by virtually all students whatever their intentions after high school.

***What can be done?***

Our information on many of the questions I have been discussing is inadequate. I would therefore like to see a national project that would tell us with some authority what is really happening in high school English programs; whether it is indeed true that writing requirements have decreased and by how much; what kind of textbooks and materials are in actual use in the classroom and how they are used; and whether teachers are overburdened or poorly prepared. Such a project might tell us whether there should be more emphasis on the teaching of writing in teacher-training programs, and what kind of in-service training is most promising. Without such information, we must inevitably rely to some extent on intuition and supposition.

My own strong belief is that the problem of writing skills is solvable. Judging only by our experience at the University of California at Berkeley, I am confident that high school teachers can be taught to teach writing and that, having had such training, they can, given time, make a considerable improvement in high school achievement. This conclusion is based on several years of experience we have had at Berkeley with summer workshops for English teachers, conducted by the Bay Area Writing Project. These workshops are conducted by skilled teachers, using some of the hard-won tricks of their trade, and they appear to be uniformily successful. The approach of the Bay Area Writing Project differs from that of the new math and science in that new subject matter is not introduced. It is not professor to teacher, but teacher to teacher, and it seems to work.

Among the other things that might be done, in addition to special workshops and institutes for teachers similar to the Bay Area Writing Project, I would stress the following:

- The federal government should begin to plan a large-scale intervention program, not in testing or curriculum development, but in the training of teachers, both pre-service and in-service. This will not be easy in a period of budget-cutting and shrinking enrollments, but as I said earlier, the public will give it strong support.
- Funding programs that already exist in the Office of Education and grant programs in HEW should be examined to see if

experimental writing programs in secondary schools can be encouraged and supported. The National Institute of Education and the National Endowment for the Humanities ought to be interested.

- State licensing standards for English teachers should be examined for emphasis on writing.
- Rather simple objectives can be set for high schools—improvement, for example, in SAT-Verbal scores. In spite of the dislike of many people for standardized tests, I am told they correlate very well with writing ability.
- Support should be given to data collection programs such as the National Assessment of Educational Progress and the National Longitudinal Study. These programs are beginning to give us a base for measuring achievement. Studies of the effectiveness of increased state and local testing programs should be supported.
- College faculties should come forward with an operational definition for the high schools of what they mean by "fully prepared in English."

# II

## *A Response to Albert H. Bowker*

**Stephen White**

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*Reacting to the foregoing report by Mr. Bowker, Stephen White, vice president of the Sloan Foundation, wrote him the following letter, dated September 15, 1976.*

I've thought a lot about secondary school education, and on several occasions have gone as far as sitting down to write something about it. I've been frustrated by my inability to think of anything that I really thought worth your while. I find I have opinions, but not much more, by which I mean that I have no real idea what actions, if any, seem to be indicated by those opinions.

For example, I have iterated my belief that a great deal of the ambiguity apparent in debates about education (which hereafter will refer to secondary education unless otherwise noted) arises out of the coexistence within the secondary school of educational and non-educational functions without any clear line of demarcation between the two and with no attempt to assign costs. I have a feeling that more and more students emerge from high school uninstructed but with good teeth. This may be what society wants, but if so it should be labeled "dental care in the secondary school environment" and so costed out. It shouldn't be confused with the educational function—or at least, so I believe.

But having said that much, I don't know what one would do about it, and what kind of change it would promote if I did know. So in the end it may be nothing more than an assertion of indignation, which doesn't carry us very far forward.

Reading what you have been writing, I discern (it doesn't take much wit to do so) two quite distinct threads. On the one hand, you seem to be concerned about the articulation of secondary school

education with subsequent life-styles. (I shun the word "career" because most people do not in fact have careers—only jobs.) But more often than not, this concern drifts off into consideration of writing skills without any reasoned statement of the linkage. There is, of course, some linkage, but it does not exist over the whole range. That is to say, I doubt that a coal miner has any real need for writing skills, nor will his life be changed very much one way or another if he lacks them.

As far as articulation is concerned, I began thinking about that back in the 1950's when I was working with the Physical Science Study Committee and the question of articulation was forced upon us. Initially, the opposition to PSSC came from university physics professors. Their objection, in its essentials, was that with the best will in the world high school teachers merely disseminated misinformation about physics. As university physicists they would rather greet matriculants who were totally ignorant of physics than such as would have to go through a painful process of unlearning before they could begin to learn. To some extent, the shape ultimately assumed by PSSC was influenced by those criticisms.

I always felt uneasy about that outcome, and after PSSC was finished I began agitating for a physics course, for the secondary school, which would focus its attention on the application rather than the generation of physical principles. Francis Freedman, who played a central role in PSSC, was an ally, unexpectedly enough, but died before we could get started and I lacked either clout, or energy, or both, so it never happened.

Meanwhile Gerald Holton, at Harvard, was addressing himself to still another student group—or at least I envisaged it as such. This was the group that would never have any formal association with physics once it had been graduated from high school. What it learned in any formal sense about physics, it would have to learn in high school or it would not learn it at all. For such a student, physics could be construed as an element in a liberal arts education, which would contribute marginally to his understanding of what he was likely to read from time to time in the morning paper or watch on television, and otherwise in some vague fashion make him a better person and a better citizen.

I think that for every academic subject, something like these groupings can be identified. There is the student whose encounter with a subject is the first stage of a lifelong association with that

subject or some closely cognate subject as the primary element in his career. There is the student who will be doing things in his lifetime that require or might benefit from an acquaintance with the output of scholarship in some field or another (although the scholarship in question may date back a century or several centuries) but who doesn't contemplate a career that will add to knowledge in that particular subject. Finally, there is the student whose association with that subject in any formal sense will begin and end in secondary school or perhaps during his first year of college, but who is not likely either to create within that subject nor to make extensive use of it.

My argument is that in any subject, common or recondite, one would ideally fashion curricula for each of those three groups, and that in many subjects those curricula will differ so greatly among themselves as to constitute distinct educational initiatives. It would be necessary to develop each of those curricula on its own terms, from scratch, with the three distinct particular ends in view. Physics for the physicist, the chemist, the biologist, the electrical engineer, would be one thing; physics for the engineering technician, the M.D., the automobile mechanic, would be another; physics for the business executive, the salesman, the housewife (if they continue to exist) would be still another. And the three curricula might very well have little or even nothing in common.

Incidentally, I am not sure this applies to mathematics; it may be that everyone is in either group one or group two, and that group three is pretty nearly empty. But I am not sure even of that much. Go beyond the most basic arithmetic, and it may be that for a great many people it would be better if they learned something *about* mathematics rather than mathematics itself, particularly in this age of the autonomous checkout counter and the handheld calculator. But to turn to your own domain, I'd be willing to bet that it applies to statistics and probability.

This is, it seems to me, the link between articulation and writing skills. The discipline in this instance is called "English." It includes writing and reading skills, with some but not much leakage into speaking and listening skills. You can identify for English the same three groups you can identify for the other disciplines. Yet they are all taught more or less as if they were group one, when most of them are either group two or three.

I can define group one as the students who will go on to major in

English, or drama, or comparative literature, or some foreign language, in college. They are few. Group two are the people for whom the most important element of that discipline is writing skill, or perhaps writing/reading skill. In the kind of economy we now have, this is certainly the largest single group of customers for "English" education. Group three no doubt was once the largest group, and I suppose is still large.

The deplorable fact is that "English" education, as it is now designed, positively disserves group two. English composition is still wedded to English literature. A part of this is probably the persistence of the half-truth that English literature at its best represents English composition at its best. There is a sense in which this is true, but another sense—more important in this context—in which it is most misleading. In the world of literature, lucidity of exposition is by no means the highest aim. In contrast, the great literature is an exercise in ambiguity. It is not the meaning of a word, as it is understood by the great mass of readers, that interests the belles-lettrist, but the reverberations that the word sets up in the subconscious of the reader. A poet does not look for one clear statement, but for a set of statements, some of them overlapping, some of them distinct, but all of them simultaneously present in the same set of words. Fine writing, for the most part, is the enemy of clear writing.

And since English teachers themselves are drawn from group one, it is this aspect of English that most interests them, and that they assiduously seek to promote. They want "fine" writing from their students: elegant writing, allusive writing. Of course, there is a sense in which they are right: the models to which they resort are indeed the very best writing. But they are not models of the manner in which communication must take place between, say, the branch manager and the harried executive in the central office. The latter does not want to hear reverberations: he would not be sensitive to them if he did. He wants to know how the Ultra-Ban is moving.

To make the articulation, for most students, between high school English and their real world, that English must start from the assumption that it will be nuts-and-bolts English. Some invention will be necessary to make that possible: more of that later. (Or maybe not—there used to be courses called "Business English" and conceivably someone, somewhere, sometime created a good one. I doubt it.)

There, I think, lies the link between articulation and writing: it is the accident that of all one learns in secondary school, "English" is likely to be worst articulated with future life-styles. In fact, there is a stronger element present (or at least there was in my education) than I have put forward here. There is, in secondary school and far more sharply in college "English" or "English Composition" courses, a positive contempt for lucid expository writing. Indeed, I sensed it in one of your Bay Area Writing Project people.

All this is very easy to say, but it doesn't lead very far. Articulation of secondary school with subsequent life-styles, if I am correct, means some form of tracking. Tracking, I am given to understand, is un-American except in those instances in which it is used to penalize the competent.

There is a half-way house, I suppose. If a school offered courses designed for all three groups I have purported to identify, it could then throw each track open to all comers. Naturally, all students with academic pretensions would flock to the elite "literary" course and as a consequence leave school illiterate and furnished with learning without comprehension. But at least a few would learn to write (and read) expository prose.

The trouble is, such a recourse doesn't solve the problem of the teaching corps. They themselves are stubbornly group one—failed novelists and poets and playwrights and critics. It is their own contempt for straightforward composition that makes them bad teachers of composition, when they make any real attempt to teach it at all. I don't know what you do about this.

As far as the teaching of composition is concerned, the old truths are still sound; what is lacking is imagination and persistence in the application of those truths.

Anyone who sets out to write expository prose goes through several successive stages:

**1.** He puts his thoughts in order. The first and the most essential task is to come to terms with the formal structure of what he wants to say. What comes first, what second, what third? What is the main line of his presentation, and what are the lemmas that are likely to cry out for development as he proceeds along the main line? What must be asserted at length, so that there will be some assurance it will be understood; what can be skated over lightly, because it doesn't really bear much of the weight of the presentation? This is fundamentally an outlining job, and, I might add, a

re-outlining job. I have been writing expository prose, for money or as part of my job, for more than forty years, and I still outline and re-outline before I get down to writing.

2. He converts the outline into extended prose. Here his main purpose is to make a correspondence between outline and narrative. The formal structure no longer concerns him: it is a problem that was previously solved.

3. He examines his prose, sentence by sentence and word by word, for the possibility of ambiguity. Where it is a danger, he rewrites.

4. He re-examines his draft for traces of elegance and fine writing. Each instance he finds, he scrutinizes with all the skepticism he can muster. Anything that indubitably passes that scrutiny he permits to remain. The rest is ruthlessly excised.

Now, that kind of process doesn't preclude lively writing, or imaginative writing, nor even (in the hands of the proficient) superb prose. But drill in that process, under close and interested supervision, will almost guarantee lucid prose, and that is about all that education can guarantee. Anything beyond that is a gift from the gods.

It seems to me that education in expository writing should follow that pattern. If I were charged with teaching such a course in secondary school, I would do something like the following:

1. Collect twenty or thirty "readings," selected from the daily and periodical press for their lucidity. In each instance, assign the students to convert the reading back to an outline: a highly economical outline.

2. In class, have students chosen at random expose their outlines on the blackboard and refine them via classroom discussion.

3. Continue this process for several weeks.

4. When it is clear that the class's ability to recognize a good outline has been maximized, pass on to stage II—assign subjects with the requirement that students bring back an outline of the sort to which they had by then become accustomed. Expose these outlines to classroom criticism for several weeks.

5. Sometime in January, without warning, ask them to begin the process of converting outlines into prose.

You can take it from there. I am convinced the rest would be easy, if only because by the time that stage is reached it will have

become clear to all the students that the goal is clarity and not elegance.

The process I propose would be, I think, responsive to other forms of communication. It is, for example, exactly the kind of process one goes through in preparing an advertisement, except that images and layout enter along with prose as considerations. In advertising even more than in ordinary prose, the injunction concerning elegance is important.

In a great many respects, it applies to what might be called expository television. There is one primary difference, arising out of logistic difficulties in television: the initial outline is likely to be strongly affected by the pictures one actually has or can reasonably expect to get. But that is really a minor difference. The demand for structure before performance is a prime element in preparing television. Television, as only television people are aware, is in a very fundamental way a writer's medium, simply because it calls upon proficiencies which the writer (with the infinite resources of the written language at his command) is more likely to master than the image-maker.

I add these notions of advertising and television partly because I think one can devise a coherent course or set of courses, at the secondary school level, in "expository communications." But in my wilder fancies, I go beyond that. I have a hunch that the process must be the same, or much the same, in computery. If it is, there is an exciting curriculum waiting to be devised, lacking only people with skill, wit, and energy who will do the job.

# III

## *An Interim Report on What the Foundation Has Learned*

**Stephen White**

*The results of the Foundation's inquiry into the problems of teaching expository writing were summarized by Stephen White in an internal document, reprinted below, in the spring of 1977, and the broad outline of a new Sloan Foundation program was drawn. A decision on the course of action recommended in this report will be made in 1978.*

Over the past several months, considerable effort has been devoted to determining what the Foundation might do to increase the level of skills in expository writing at which students complete their educational careers. Members of the staff have spoken at some length with some sixty persons representing higher education, pre-college education, and the writing profession itself.

There seems to be little difference of opinion concerning the present level of writing skills that students bring with them into higher education, or with which for the most part they are graduated from higher education. Those who deal with the students at the pre-college level, confident as they may be about their own competence in teaching expository writing, seem for the most part prepared to concede that they are not successfully doing so. Those who meet those students upon their entry into and passage through higher education report unanimously that the students lack ordinary competence in the writing of their own langauge, and that writing deficiencies limit severely the degree to which students can benefit from higher education at the time and in their subsequent careers. During all the discussions, there was never a note of satis-

faction with the present state of affairs; there was instead a recurrent chorus of deep dismay.

The impressionistic and anecdotal evidence of student incompetence is reinforced by the statistical evidence that can be brought to bear on the issue. Considerable formal testing and assessment take place in the pre-college educational system and in connection with college admissions. Careful analysis of all that evidence clearly indicates that the regression in writing skills over recent years is real. It is not a consequence of a changing pre-college student population, nor of a change in standards of skill, nor of testing methodology, although at one time or another one or all of these have been brought forward to suggest that lower test scores are illusory.

One of those with whom we met has subsequently written: "Some take the stance that there is nothing new here, since crises in writing have been seen at fairly regular intervals over the past seventy-five or one hundred years. My belief is that the rhetoric sounds similar, but that 'Johnny can't write' has had different referents. 'Can't write' now frequently means that a bright student has come to the university who has *never,* repeat *never,* written a paper. 'Can't write' in 1925 seems to have meant not being able to produce interesting, literate essays at fairly regular intervals with economy of time and effort. 'Can't write' now, in an open-admissions university, can mean a lack of skills that borders on illiteracy or *is* illiteracy."

That view, or something very much like it, was uniformly held among those with whom we met, whether from elementary schools, public secondary schools, private secondary schools or colleges and universities at various levels of selectivity.

From those who were primarily responsible for the teaching of expository writing at the pre-college level, there came no sense whatsoever of culpability. On the contrary, they appeared unanimously to believe on the one hand that they possessed the knowledge and the techniques required to provide an educational experience that would eventuate in adequate or superior writing skills among those who were submitted to their tutelage, and on the other hand that they were being systematically prevented by forces outside their control from deploying that knowledge and those techniques.

The culprit recurrently named by the pre-college teachers was television. Repeatedly it was argued that television destroyed in the young the desire and hence the ability to read ordinary expository prose (or in the extreme any prose at all) and that the ability to

write cogently and economically was inextricably associated with the ability to read with the same facility. It was argued by a few that neither of the two premises had ever been adequately demonstrated: that it was on the one hand possible that exposure to television both enhanced and encouraged reading and on the other hand possible that expository writing could be taught quite as well in an environment dominated by television as in any other. But the general view was otherwise.

A somewhat more subtle indictment of television was made by one of our correspondents: "Broadly, all of us over the age of about 45 learned about interesting things first from books. Everybody under the age of about 35 learned about interesting things first from TV. So the art of learning about described things (as distinct from about theoretical things) from the written word has declined. In consequence, the art of describing things in writing has declined abruptly . . . The crisis here is that reasonable proficiency in written, and indeed verbal, communication is a desperate need at various stages of educational development and of practical efficiency, but it is no longer a popular need at an early stage of having fun and seeming competent among one's contemporaries."

Second in order in the assignment of culpability was the class-size imposed upon teachers in the public schools. It was agreed that the teaching of expository writing involved a constant process of interaction between the teacher and the individual students, and that under circumstances in which the teacher might bear responsibility for as many as 150 students that kind of interaction became a practical impossibility.

In the real world, those two arguments can in fact become statements of impotence. It is not likely that television, or its attractiveness and availability to the child and the adolescent, will abruptly vanish. It is equally unlikely that present class sizes, in the public schools, will abruptly diminish. Those teachers who assign their failures to one or both of those elements are in practice resigning themselves to failure. But otherwise perceived, television and large class-size can be recognized as nothing more than a description of the environment in which, somehow, a well-designed teaching process must be made to succeed: a sense of impotence will thereupon give way to a sense of challenge. Little such sense of challenge was noted among the preponderance of those we met who adduced television and class size as the twin enemies of the teaching process.

The third major issue that was raised had to do with what might be called the politics of the public school system. Essentially, the point was made that the system itself was no longer able to demand certain kinds of effort from its students. Homework could no longer be seriously assigned, since the students would not perform it nor the parents support it. Nor could curriculum be imposed upon students beyond the very early grades; by the time the student reached secondary school, and perhaps even earlier, the system was obliged to provide a highly elective curriculum in which inevitably the rigorous courses in expository writing gave way to soft and undisciplined courses in "creative" writing (with the implicit assumption that an adolescent who had not yet come to grips with the bare elements of English prose could somehow write anything that might seriously be called "poetry") or to "experience" with an eight-millimeter camera.

Finally, the question was raised whether those in the public schools to whom the teaching of expository writing was generally assigned were in fact either by training or by inclination equipped to teach expository writing. But this question crosses over from the pre-college system into the colleges and universities themselves, and can more appropriately be considered in that latter context.

We were at the outset somewhat surprised to discover that little concern was felt regarding the resources, whether intellectual or material, that the struggling teacher could bring to bear upon his classroom task. In general, it seemed a matter of full agreement among the teachers themselves that they knew pretty much all they needed to know about how to teach expository writing, and that they possessed in the way of resources all they needed to possess (except time).

Those attitudes did not appear to us to conform to what we saw. Textbooks used by the teachers (among them one specially prepared by one of the country's most prestigious private schools for its own highly selected students) were remorselessly analytic, as they have been for more than a century. They began, and in some cases, ended with a close analysis of grammar, syntax, and rhetoric. The student was expected to make his entry into the writing of prose with endless classifications of grammatical regularities and the appropriate use of the gerund, the gerundive and possibly the ablative absolute. But writing itself is synthetic and not analytic. It begins with the process of deciding exactly what it is one wants to

say and what might be the most effective structure of its most lucid statement. That statement itself, if it is to be maximally lucid, must conform to the rules of grammar, syntax, and rhetoric, but those are subsequent considerations. What is more, for those who have not yet felt the excitement of writing economically and cogently and not yet proceeded to experience the pleasures of craftsmanship for its own sake, the analysis of English (or Latin) prose is mechanical and dull, and utterly without any internal significance; it is as if the struggling student were to be called upon to learn all the rules of arithmetic without any suggestion that they have consequences in a real world of arithmetic manipulation, or to learn the workings of an internal combustion engine before being permitted to drive.

Other texts or quasi-texts existed at the other extreme. They assumed that the student had already learned to write communicative English prose and concentrated their counsel upon areas of elegance and finesse. As often as not, their concealed purpose was to ossify the English language at precisely the point at which it existed when the author first learned its prevailing rules, a generation or two earlier.

At the colleges and universities, the problems take a quite different form, and are to a far larger extent problems of the internal organization of the institutions themselves.

There are, to be sure, certain similarities to the earlier stages of education. Over much of the postwar period, and in particular during the 1960's the colleges abdicated their responsibility for standards of achievement. Quoting again from a correspondent: ". . . a motion for greater freedom caused many colleges to clear off Freshman Composition courses . . . We went to . . . jazzy courses with titles like 'Imagination and Betrayal,' 'Archaeology of the Trash Can,' . . . and 'The Black American Experience.' . . . Many colleges dropped composition without *any* replacement."

To some extent, that period of neglect has passed, if for no other reason than that the new generation of students appear to be recognizing as they enter higher education that the neglect of English composition in their pre-college education may well have serious consequences for their later careers. There is now a significant demand for courses in expository writing to which the institutions find themselves obliged to respond.

They are unable to do so. Over the centuries institutions of higher

education have organized on the assumption that their matriculants will bring with them something close to a mastery of their native language, as readers, writers, listeners, and speakers. The tradition of the English faculty, at a first-rate institution or even a fifth-rate institution, is primarily that of scholarship in literature or occasionally of great achievement in creative writing; in both instances it is the assumption that a mastery of reading and writing, at the expository level, has long since been achieved by both professor and student. Advancement through the professorial ranks, and achievement among the students, are secured by the diligence with which fine distinctions can be made in the exegesis of the text of "Finnegans Wake."

Hence, where composition is taught it is assigned to second-class citizens within the department: graduate students, junior staff, mavericks, and the incompetent among the tenured faculty. Few of them are likely to have the least enthusiasm for what they are about, or any talent in its exercise.

This disorganization exists in circumstances which seem to demand of the institution, if it is to fulfill its functions at all seriously, greater efforts in remediation than it has ever before been called upon to provide. The most hopeful aspect of all this is that the institutions themselves have become aware in the last few years of their enormous deficiencies with respect to the teaching of expository prose—their students have instructed them, if nothing else has happened—and among them there are many who are strongly disposed to take steps.

Some of what has been described here as characteristic of the colleges and universities is somewhat applicable in the secondary and the junior high school. Many of those who enlist to teach English in those schools are primarily interested either in English literature or in creative writing, and had in colleges and universities shaped their education accordingly. They are not necessarily skilled in the teaching of expository English, and in general are not attracted to the prospect of teaching expository English. Their perception of what constitutes model English prose is likely to be far more exalted than what is called for in a mundane career in a mundane world. There is nothing at all wrong with so exalted an approach—indeed in many aspects it is laudable—but all the same it remains for most students in most circumstances highly inappropriate.

If a foundation officer makes inquiries, he can expect ordinarily to reap a harvest of grant proposals however explicitly he may state that he is not, for the moment at least, in the market for proposals. In this instance, the normal response has been notably absent. The indication of Sloan Foundation interest, implicit in the inquiries themselves, attracted almost no response. An English supervisor of one school system dispatched a rambling letter which was more nearly a plea for assistance than a plan of action with its appropriate price-tag. A university dean was alone in dispatching something that could be regarded as a proposal, for the support of actions which he had already begun to undertake.

The participants in the discussions (three of these discussions took place in sizable groups) announced themselves as having been intellectually stimulated by the Foundation's initiative. But clearly they were not stimulated to action. They were, for the most part, content to deplore and to excuse.

### *Courses of action*

Out of all the discussion, four possible courses of action appeared to us to present themselves. They are by no means discrete courses of action; it might well be argued that to remedy the current situation all four of them must be pursued.

First, it is our conviction that there is a desperate need for new texts, new collections of readings, and in general new teaching and learning resources at the pre-college level. We believe that such a body of resources can be brought into being only with close collaboration among pre-college teachers, college and university faculty, and professional expository writers.

The model of the science curriculum movements of the 1950's and '60's immediately suggests itself, but it is a model which must be adapted with great care. In the earlier instances there was a reasonable consensus among professionals in the several fields about the general form that a curriculum should take; the differences were those of emphasis rather than those of kind. We have been able to find no forward-looking consensus in the field of expository writing. There was instead a vague kind of agreement that the curriculum as it stands is quite adequate, and that the fault in general lay in the circumstances with which the curriculum was surrounded. As we have said, we do not endorse that view. It appears to us to be patently mistaken.

In both the science and mathematics models and among those with whom we spoke there was agreement that considerable in-service training of pre-college teachers would be essential. The English fraternity appears to believe that such training should largely take the form of mutual encouragement and the sharing of successful and unsuccessful experience. We believe, with the earlier movements, that for a variety of reasons that kind of training is not likely to be effective unless it is accompanied by new materials. First, the stimulation that comes with the availability of new materials is likely to be a central element in building enthusiasm for in-service training. Second, it is a hard fact that the existing material, used under existing circumstances, has no great battery of successes to be shared out among the participants.

We believe also that there must be curriculum invention of sorts that we can only suggest dimly. If television is seen as an enemy, perhaps it must be converted into an ally. The elements that go into successful expository writing are exactly those that go into successful expository television: logical process and orderly structure. The syntax, grammar, and rhetoric are quite different but it remains our conviction that such matters are truly secondary: they do not create lucidity, they support it.

We do not for a moment minimize the difficulties that would accompany any attempt at curriculum reform. At the pre-college level, there is no great source of support for any such enterprise. At the college and university level, there is no organized professional group which might divert some of its energies to such a curriculum effort. The departments of English, as we have said, do not construe it to be their affair, and members of other departments would be, for a variety of obvious reasons, reluctant to assume the responsibility. One might toy with the notion of looking for assistance from schools of journalism, but that is not an encouraging prospect, since those schools themselves do not appear to house much vitality.

What can be said positively it truly little. There is indeed a general awareness among the various levels of education and among the general public that the present state of affairs is dismal and damaging, and there is likely to be widespread support for any ambitious course of action even though that support is likely to be general and well-meaning rather than purposeful and dedicated. And in a country as large as this one, and as well-

endowed educationally, there are certain to be highly motivated and skilled individuals here and there who will interrupt their careers to perform a task that they sincerely believe must be performed. We have, in our brief inquiries, found some although not many.

It is clear to us that at the outset any attempt at curriculum reform must be highly experimental; that a wide variety of small curriculum reform programs is likely to be more valuable than any attempt to create at one large leap a national curriculum reform program. Underlying that belief is the impression that there is not now a firm pedagogical base for the teaching of expository English.

Educational research itself might be brought into being to provide such a base. Those to whom we have spoken appear to share the view that not enough is known of the fundamental cognitive processes that accompany the development of skills in the use of the mother tongue. The questions that arise are somewhat broader than those with which these notes are concerned: they deal with the acquisition of speaking, listening, and reading skills as well as writing skills, and with the acquisition of certain symbolized skills in general.

We are persuaded that such fundamental research is necessary. But we are also concerned with the short term, and there must be some question whether such research can be converted into educational insights in anything but the very long term.

One can also identify activities that could be termed, in a very broad sense, political. These notes have spoken on the one hand of a situation within the public school system which makes difficult the organization of serious attempts to teach expository writing, and on the other hand of a general public impression that such serious attempts are necessary. There may well be means by which that general public impression can be transformed into modes which will impose fundamental changes upon the schools themselves. A school system is likely to be responsive, and indeed immediately responsive, to parents who have organized themselves to demand more rigorous curriculum, more writing in all phases of the curriculum, grading in which writing skills are taken into account, the assignment of serious homework, and testing procedures that will reflect back into the curriculum an emphasis upon expository writing.

Finally, within the universities there will be a need for financial support of efforts in remediation of those students who matriculate without fundamental writing skills, and academic support for those students who perceive as they proceed through college the need for continual improvement of whatever writing skills they possess.

Given the nature of the organization of the teaching of English in colleges, those efforts are likely to be difficult and expensive. Within departments of English it may be necessary to take steps that will encourage existing faculty to concentrate a portion of their attention on writing skills; to attach remedial efforts to departments of English; to encourage the stimulation of writing skills outside the departments of English; to prepare new curriculum; to provide whatever teaching aids may be required (of which the principal aid might well be a dedicated Xerox machine); and for whatever costs might be associated with what is really likely to be a fundamental change in the organization of portions of the college.

### *The role of the Foundation*

We find in all this strong encouragement for further investigatory efforts looking toward the advisability of establishing a Particular Program in Writing Skills, to begin possibly in 1978 and certainly (if it proves on further investigation to be practical) in the following year.

Of the four courses of action we have identified, it appears to us that three can be combined into the coherent and *ad hoc* kind of undertaking that defines a Particular Program. We believe that the fundamental pedagogical research can be begun on a limited scale and be largely abandoned after a period of five to seven years to run thereafter on its own resources and the resources it can attract from other funding agencies. We do not believe that the Foundation should invest large resources in those activities nor be prepared to support them indefinitely.

At the other end of the process, we believe that five to seven years of limited support for colleges and universities will initiate in a substantial number of those institutions the remediation efforts which are now so necessary and the continuing efforts that will provide for students more than marginal skills in expository

writing. A movement thus well begun is likely to continue and spread after the Foundation's part in it is completed.

The largest effort, we believe, should be in the lower schools, and should take the form initially of major support for localized curriculum reform, and ultimately of substantial support of national curriculum reform building on the best of the models that can be provided locally. We do not believe that the Foundation is likely to be called upon to provide that ultimate substantial support; we believe that should be the responsibility of the federal government and we are persuaded that, once provided with models, the federal government will provide that support. In any case, we believe that the provision of models is of itself a completely reasonable activity for a private foundation of moderate means.

As for the steps we have termed "in a very broad sense political," it is possible they may emerge naturally out of the other three. We do not believe they should constitute a starting point for the Foundation, not because they are (in the sense we have used the term) "political" but because we believe that the function of a foundation is implementation rather than preachment wherever that implementation, or some substantial part of it, is within reach of the foundation itself.

We are aware of two objections to the course we propose. The Foundation has occupied itself primarily with colleges and universities; we are asking it not only to enter into the concerns of pre-college education but inevitably to enter at the very lowest levels; we are asking also that the Foundation engage in the new field of educational research. We are recommending these new ventures, morover, without any strong assurance that they can be successfully brought to fruition; in all honesty, we cannot set very high the prospects of even a partial success.

We make the proposals, none the less, because even our brief association with this family of problems has persuaded us that no program that we might conceive could be of as much importance as this at all levels of education, including those levels with which the Foundation has been customarily associated. We cannot, at this moment, perceive a greater and more persuasive educational need. We hope that the Foundation will have both the enterprise and the flexibility to make the attempt.

# IV

## *How to Improve Writing Skills*

**Norman Macrae**

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*The three preceding documents, together with others, were sent in the spring of 1977 to Norman Macrae, deputy editor of* The Economist *and a journalist of extraordinary experience and talent with a seasoned knowledge of the United States. One of the papers upon which Mr. Macrae drew most heavily in preparing his comments was* Balance the Basics: Let Them Write *by Dr. Donald H. Graves, of the University of New Hampshire. That paper has subsequently been published by the Ford Foundation, which commissioned it.*

The input for this paper has come from papers transmitted to me after discussions which officers of the Sloan Foundation have had with a large number of people, both individually and in groups, representing higher education, pre-college education, and the writing profession. Passages in quotation marks in this report are from those papers, without further attribution.

### *"A recurrent chorus of deep dismay"*

The following points stand out from the discussions.

There is overwhelming agreement that the degeneration of writing skills in the United States now amounts to a major national crisis. So it does in other rich countries, but they are outside my terms of reference.

The degeneration is real. Considerable formal testing takes place in the pre-college examination system and in connection with university admissions. It now yields hard statistical evidence of the drop in writing competence that has occurred. We have received

pleas that "one of the most urgent needs is for an improvement in college entrants' writing skills and communication skills" from faculty members as apparently far removed from school departments of English "as university teachers of mathematics, physical sciences, social sciences, foreign languages, those in charge of minority engineering programs and of education for the public service."

No comfort is to be derived from pretenses that "there is nothing new here since crises in writing have been seen at fairly regular intervals over the past 100 years." Says one university teacher among our correspondents: "In 1925 complaints that 'Johnny can't write' meant that he was not able to produce interesting, literate essays at fairly regular intervals with economy of time and effort. Today 'can't write' frequently means that a bright student has come to the university who has *never*, repeat *never*, written a paper."

In private life, this has been accompanied by a dramatic drop in letter writing by Americans compared with the letters their grandparents wrote. In the telephone age many Americans do not write letters any more; quite suddenly, writing (including by teachers of English) is used mostly for shopping lists and short memos.

### *The cost in billions*

Awkwardly, this drop in schoolchild writing competence and in private practice at writing has come at a time when the "information industry" is becoming by far the largest and fastest-growing industry in rich countries like the United States.

If one uses wide definitions, Gordon Thompson is probably right in his calculation that "half the working population of America is now employed in pushing pieces of information about." This has happened just when the main mechanism of "pushing information about" is no longer competently taught in American schools or widely practiced in American private life.

Among those engaged in "pushing pieces of information about" are those learning and teaching all manners of subjects at universities. In this sector some cost estimates have been made to us of the loss from the drop in writing skills. A dean of the University of California at Berkeley says that his "estimate of the increase in quality which would accrue to a Berkeley education resulting

from adequate preparation of students in English is that it would provide an increment of something like one-half of a year in material covered. In addition, all materials covered in the curriculum would be handled at a greater level of intellectual sophistication." Berkeley entrants are probably above-average in writing skills, spread over the whole United States. The saving of over one-eighth of the cost of first degree college education would save several billions of dollars a year.

And this can be only the tip of the iceberg. The much bigger losses from the lack of writing skills [illegible]r in the worlds of business and of human development. The mind boggles if one tries to apply that Berkeley estimate of "one half year's work lost" to the half of the U.S. working population engaged in the business of spreading or imbibing information.

Most important of all are such judgments in the Sloan-inspired papers as:

> • When people cannot write, this robs them not only of a valuable tool for expression but an important means of developing thinking and reading power as well. At present reading is taught much more thoroughly in the U.S. than writing, and this imbalance between sending and receiving should be anathema in a democracy. A democracy relies heavily on "each individual's sense of voice, authority and ability to communicate desires and information."
>
> • For a schoolchild writing develops initiative, courage and his (or her) self-concept as a learner and powers as a thinker. It strengthens other subjects, especially reading and thinking. The child who can express himself in writing will make more effective contributions as a citizen, parent and worker.
>
> • The retailing of information is the most important task in America today, and the most inefficiently performed. Crazily, the data-processing revolution itself is being held up mainly by linguistic restraints. A computer can be told what to do only by somebody who expresses to somebody else exactly what he wants. If the ancients had had our accountants they would not have invented the phonetic alphabet, because it would take at least 25

years to pay off, and meanwhile nobody could explain to accountants precisely what an invention that would take 25 years was supposed to do.

- The real tragedy is the neglect of teaching writing to students at the least privileged levels. All of America's life-styles are being changed because office jobs are now following manufacturing jobs out of the cities, since inner-city blacks are deemed incapable of clerkly work.

### *The purpose of this report*

The most hopeful aspects of the discussion in which the Sloan Foundation has engaged are that American educational institutions themselves have become aware of their deficiencies in teaching expository prose, and among them there are many who are strongly disposed to take steps. The discussions, reports a Sloan Foundation executive, have shown that many people are convinced that "much needs to be done, and that much needs to be invented in the areas of syllabus, texts and other teaching materials, in-service and pre-service training, and pedagogical innovation. At the same time, discussions never moved far beyond these general statements. There emerged, whether from individuals or from the group that was convened, no clear sense of precisely what kinds of inventions are required, nor how to go about making those inventions."

It was at this stage that it was suggested to me that I might propose some inventions, and possible ways of making them, on the thesis that this is the sort of situation to which the mind of a journalist often responds. When other people have lots of vague ideas, a journalist of inquiring mind tends—after exposure to these—to have a fair number of precise ideas, a large proportion of them outrageous. But these in themselves sometimes help to stimulate reactions which allow something positive to be achieved.

My brief is to be specific, which means to be controversial. That affects the order and tone in which the rest of this paper is to be presented. The attemptedly persuasive part of this paper is now over. Since I am seeking to help action, not to proselytize precise converts, I will be tactlessly brutal from now on in analysis and recommendations. If various of the recommendations seem politically or administratively impossible in the present state of academic

establishment opinion, decision-makers can then take note of that, take later note of the problems the proposals were designed to tackle, and be ready to think of modified ways round them.

I was asked to suggest needed inventions in the areas of (1) syllabus, (2) in-service and pre-service training, (3) texts and other teaching materials, and (4) pedagogical innovation. My brief conclusions in these four fields are:

### *Syllabus*

I believe that the present crisis of declining skills in expository writing will not be overcome until the subject still called "English" is divided, both in schools and universities, into two subjects. For reasons that will emerge, I prefer contumaciously to call the two subjects "English Literature" and "American Language," and will so call them for most of the rest of this report.

In English Literature the objective in writing classes is to teach fine writing, allusive writing, writing which stimulates feelings and ideas, writing in which each word sets up reverberations in the subconscious of the reader, writing which includes beautiful ambiguities. As an author of six books and of over 3,500 articles mostly in what I suppose are the more "intellectual" newspapers, I happen to be an enthusiast for this subject; acclimatization with and enjoyment of the great works which are our heritage in literature have given me some of the happiest hours of my life. But this is not the crisis area. It is the sort of writing the best English teachers like (possibly too much) to teach. Don't spend Sloan money on this.

In the real crisis area of (largely non-existent) American Language courses, the objective in writing classes should be to teach expository writing, with no ambiguities at all. The purpose is to teach somebody how to write an explanation which will instruct a dumb cluck like me how to repair a television set or a fuse without frying myself, how to impart information which the writer has but the reader until that moment has not had, how to write a report from a branch manager to a harrassed executive in central office which will tell him what he needs to know, how to draw up a form that will bring in information instead of spread bafflement, how to write an explanatory leaflet teaching me how to play three-dimensional chess, how (this is going to be more and

more important) to express oneself sufficiently logically and unambiguously that one can even be understood by that dumbest, most unimaginative, most ambiguity-hating of boobies but geniuses—one's office computer.

### *In-service and pre-service training*

One great difficulty is that the teaching corps for American Language courses at present does not exist. Most teachers of English are majors in English Literature or some allied subject at college. They are, says one cruel critic in the papers submitted to me, "failed novelists and poets and playwrights and critics. It is their own contempt for straightforward composition that makes them bad teachers of composition, when they make any real attempt to teach it at all."

I will suggest later how the Sloan Foundation might help prime the pump to provide pre-service and in-service training for teachers of American Language courses. But it will be easiest to summarize first my conclusions on the other two areas suggested to me as "areas in which inventions are needed."

### *Texts and other teaching materials*

More than 90 per cent of instruction is governed by textbooks in the classroom, according to the Educational Products Information Exchange, a non-profit, consumer-supported organization. A good textbook for expository writing does not exist.

Some figures from a recent report to the Ford Foundation: A review of public investment at the local and federal levels shows that for every $1 spent on writing more than $100 is spent on reading. Of exemplary programs chosen for recognition in 1976 by a U.S. Office of Education panel in the area of language, 46 were in reading, only seven included writing as even one of the objectives, and only one had a program for the specific development of writing abilities. Research in writing is decades behind that in reading.

Publishers have followed the research dollars. Only 10 to 15 per cent of language arts textbooks for children are even nominally devoted to writing. Examination shows that these are nearly all dominated by grammar, punctuation, spelling, and vocabulary development. None seems to be devoted to providing sensible expository texts or showing how to teach writing.

There ought to be a huge market opportunity here. A textbook

teaching the writing of clear, unambiguous expository English should have a worldwide market. We are not concerned here merely with the 400 million people on earth to whom English is their first language. A majority of businesses in non-English-speaking areas need to teach their brainworkers how to write clear, expository (not allusive or ambiguous) English too.

Why has this book not been written, and why is it not making some publishing firm very rich indeed? The problem is very probably one of priming the pump. The investment that publishers would need to make in a series for teaching writing would be large. The investment before manufacture even in presenting a reading series is between $3 million and $4 million, and the first printing costs between $6 million and $8 million. The amount of time it takes for a company to get a return on its investment is long. Publishers must be careful; they publish to meet teacher desire and expectation; they are not in the business of innovation. If teachers wish more reading and less writing, that is what they will get.

Teachers at present don't want textbooks on expository writing, because that is not the easiest subject for any teacher (especially English Literature majors) to teach. "When a salesman comes to a school representing a company which sells math, language arts, social studies and other textbooks, that salesman sells in relation to his own personal sales incentives. If a school system buys a new reading series, the monetary return to salesman and company is greater than any other textbook sale he can make." That sale then "uses up" a large part of the "English" department's budget. When schools expend large parts of their funds in this way, they protect their investment through curricular reform, teacher workshops, and the provision of reading specialists. There has been no such investment in the teaching of expository writing anywhere.

In the report already mentioned for the Ford Foundation, one textbook editor spoke for his profession when he said:

> When writing is part of a reading series or much writing is required, it (the materials) won't sell. Teachers want more labor-saving devices, easier scoring, and if you have to respond to a lot of writing, there is more work involved. Some publishers have tried and they have been hurt by their ventures.

The quotation from the textbook editor neatly illustrates the next big problem, which is that of:

***Pedagogical innovation***

A main reason for the failure to teach writing skills is that the two subjects (which we have called American Language and English Literature) are being crushed in the muddles created by the great trendy educational debate: between what are rather misleadingly called "closed learning systems" and "open learning systems." Their main characteristics might be listed as follows:
*Closed Learning Systems*: Learning requires discipline, work, drill, memorization. Curriculum determined by extra-classroom authority; and is programmatic, sequential, structured, formalistic.
*Open Learning Systems*: Learning is enjoyable, follows from pursuit of interests. Independent study designed to fit individual needs and interests. Recognition through competition in a few areas of excellence, but promotion of diversity and many areas of excellence, a taste of success for all.

It is usual to debate that closed learning systems are more efficient or that open learning systems are more progressive. Instead, it may be more logical to believe that certain subjects (such as American Language) can best be taught with some degree of the drill, memorization, programmatic and sequential lessons typical of closed learning systems, while certain others (such as English Literature) can best be taught with the "developmental, discovering, individualized" education typical of open learning systems.

A major difficulty is that open learning systems, especially for basic subjects, (a) take a lot of the teacher's time; and (b) do not make it easy to test general progress. Since English teachers assume that English composition should mean what we have called lessons in "elegant writing" under the subject English Literature (which can best be taught by open learning systems), they assume that English composition takes very individualized teaching and is almost impossible to test; they therefore shy away from teaching it. But in fact "expository writing" under what we have called "American Language" courses could probably best be taught by closed learning systems, in class, and should certainly be very testable: an exercise in expository writing should explain to an ignoramus how to do something. The need is for pedagogical

innovation and curriculum reform which can devise testable class courses in expository writing or American Language, teachable under closed learning systems.

It may be best at this stage to discuss briefly the main reasons advanced, by teachers themselves during the Sloan Foundation's inquiry, for the decline in writing skills.

### *Blame television?*

Much of the blame was laid on the spread of telephone and television in American homes, but in the real world, this sort of argument can become a statement of impotence. It is not likely that television, or its effectiveness and availability to the child and the adolescent, will abruptly vanish. Teachers who assign their failures to such an element are in practice resigning themselves to failure. Otherwise perceived, television should be recognized as a description of the environment in which, somehow, a well-designed teaching process must be made to succeed; a sense of impotence will then give way to a sense of challenge.

### *Blame class sizes?*

The other named culprits were class size and the present-day politics of the public school system. It was said that the teaching of writing skills involved a constant process of interaction between the teacher and the individual students; and that, under circumstances in which the teacher might bear responsibility for as many as 150 students, that kind of interaction became a practical impossibility. Moveover, under the present-day politics of the public school system, homework could no longer be seriously assigned, because students would not perform it nor parents support it. Trying to learn to write English Literature demands extensive and regular homework. Many great authors would not get past the first paragraph if told to write, from cold, an essay on some sudden subject during the next half-hour while sitting in a classroom.

Here again I think the trouble arises from a failure to distinguish between American Language lessons (clear and expository writing, which is teachable in class) and English Literature lessons (individualist and exciting writing, which can be done only in homework, with individualist attention between the teacher and the most interested pupils, and with a process-conference approach). This paper will turn now to discussing and making

recommendations on how the Sloan Foundation might best help to trigger improvements in skills of clear and expository writing in America.

***Recommendations on syllabus***

The nomenclature I have suggested may be a bit naughty. It is deliberately picked so as to try to recruit the hard practical men into support of American Language courses, while allowing the apostles of belles lettres their field in the English Literature courses. If this choice of nomenclatures would throw up battle lines, instead of aid clarity, because teachers of English Literature would feel in some way downgraded, then most certainly adopt different names. Far be it from me, as a journalist writing in London but selling largely to the United States, to wish to curb any colonialist inferiority complexes some of you in the United States still seem to love to feel in the areas of emotion, imagination, and culture. But it is a bit silly to let these complexes about the language Shakespeare spoke spill over into stopping you from teaching yourselves how to speak clearly even to your computer.

It may immediately be argued that an expression of opinion about the splitting of English courses is no part of the function of a foundation, which should be in the business of "implementation, not preachment." But I regard the introduction of American Language courses, separate from English Literature courses, as fundamental; and there will be practical work to be done in organizing the transition. I therefore agree with the correspondent who said: "Let a spokesman for the educational establishment (who believes in these ideas) be selected, and let him rally the troops." Let him (or they) get some Sloan money for projects designed to help speed the pedagogical research required for the transition. In practice, I suppose this means that some universities which set up workshops in teaching of American Language (or Expository Writing or whatever name is chosen) should get some Sloan Foundation help.

But not too much of it, and not for too long a period.

If after five to 10 years there is not a flood of students (and with them federal or state resources) into departments of American Language, in order to help fill the empty teaching and other staffs for what should by the late 1980's be a booming subject, then the initial liftoff operation will have failed, and the Sloan Foundation should

not finance the sponsors of a lost cause who are boondoggling *in vacuo*. If there is a liftoff, then the largest part of the financial supportive effort should be in the lower schools (see especially the "textbook project" recommended below). But at this stage it will be advisable to analyze what I think should be the structures of the subjects "English Literature" and "American Language."

Both should be subjects taught from elementary school on, directly after (indeed merging into) the period when the pupil is learning how to read and write.

Both English Literature and American Language even at elementary school stage will include some reading work (acclimatization with and enjoyment of the great works which are our heritage in English Literature, learning of some grammar in American Language). There is no need for any subvention from the Sloan Foundation for these types of reading work because both are already almost overtaught. It is with writing work that we are concerned.

I am impressed, by the evidence in the papers before me, that the differentiation into American Language courses and English Literature courses should initially take place in the primary grades.

Examples of the way in which the teaching of writing in American Language courses might proceed in the earliest grades come from a letter to the Sloan Foundation by Dr. George A. Miller [a psychologist at Rockefeller University]:

> My prejudices are that the kids never become self-conscious about language at primitive levels—like what a sentence is, or how you can take a sentence apart, or how you can change it by changing words in it, or how you can recognize that a sentence is ambiguous, or how you can change an ambiguous sentence to make it unambiguous. In short, I suspect no one gives them an intuitive feel for their language on which a sensible notion of grammar might be built.
>
> From my conversations with Dr. Carol Chomsky (Harvard Graduate School of Education) and my reading of Kenneth Hale (M.I.T. Department of Linguistics and Philosophy), I think there are some intelligent ideas in which a curriculum for making students sensitive to the

> fundamental structural facts of their language could be designed. In one of Hale's reports he mentions a "Breakthrough to Literacy" program that was part of the United Kingdom School Council Program in Linguistics and English Teaching (circa 1970) that introduced some of the techniques he adapted to the Navaho schools: the use of a "sentence maker," or set of cards on which words are written and that can be arranged in various ways to form different sentences and to compare the sentences with arrangements of words that do not form sentences.

Even though I am writing from Britain, I do not regard it to be the function of this paper to recommend particular schemes. But I would be in favor of the funding of some university research into the best ways of teaching writing in American Language courses at the lowest level: including some in the university workshops recommended above, and including international research.

Eloquent expression of the opportunities now being missed comes from these passages of Donald Graves' report to the Ford Foundation:

> Five-year-old Paul writes. Children want to write before they read. They are more fascinated with their own marks than with the marks of others. Young children leave their messages on refrigerators, bathroom walls, moist window panes, sidewalks, their bedroom doors, and scraps of paper.
>
> Six-year-old Paul doesn't write. He has gone to school to learn to read. Now he is in school, the message is: "Read and listen; writing and expression can wait." Research shows that Paul will wait a lifetime. The odds are he will never be encouraged to express himself.
>
> Paul will wait and wait and wait to write because a higher premium is placed on his ability to receive messages rather than to send them.

The dividing line between the teaching of imaginative (Literary) writing and the teaching of expository (Language) writing seems

entirely clear to me, although I have never seen it defined anywhere. *The dividing line is that bad Literary writing cannot really be tested or marked or assessed or corrected, although good Literary writing can be recognized and remembered. By contrast expository (Language) writing must always be tested and assessed, and the great national need is to find ways of improving what is bad.*

The first need is to make expository writing a testable and frequently tested skill. In his report to the Ford Foundation, Dr. Graves says:

> With the current emphasis on testing and documenting pupil progress, writing is a stumbling block. It resists testing. A sixth-grade teacher said, "I know why writing isn't emphasized more; it can't be tested. We are so hung up on reporting 'X' months' gains to the community on nationally normed tests that we ignore teaching those areas where it can't be done. How do you say, 'Johnny has improved six months in the quality of his writing?' We test them to death in reading and math and do some assessing on language conventions, but that is all."
>
> The evaluation of writing is a deterrent to its being taught. It is hard work. Most English teachers who take home 100 composition papers feel they must meticulously review each word, make comments and wrestle with a grade. Such work is exhausting and few English teachers have only 100 students. This is different work than that of colleagues who review multiple-choice tests or run down the answer column on the right side of a mathematics paper. Many teachers say, "I would like to offer more writing. I know it is important, but I just don't have the time to correct them (the papers) all."

I will be arguing later that expository writing should be easily testable. The task is for a child to explain something; the marking should be "pass" or "fail" according to whether the reader of the paper understands the child's instructions.

Increasingly, the giving of instructions to (or writing of programs for) computers should become part of expository writing

courses. The computers will soon show whether the instructions have been clear and unambiguous. But it will be best to discuss how more orthodox American Language lessons in high schools might proceed.

### *Teacher training*

The best model I have seen suggested for a course in expository writing at high school level is the one outlined by Stephen White in his letter of September 15, 1976 [reprinted as the second selection in this pamphlet] to Chancellor Bowker. I believe that university workshops aided by Sloan should research whether (a) this model for high school teaching seems sensible to them; or whether (b) alternative models should be tried as well (probably best bet); or whether (c) different models should be tried instead. And I would continue grants past the initial period for universities which set up teacher-training departments (including especially what one might call outpatient or extramural or in-service teacher training departments) in order to train schoolteachers for (a) or especially (b) or (c).

### *Recommendations for texts and teaching materials*

I am convinced that:

1. There is a great need for a major textbook or text series on "Expository Writing" or "American Language."

2. Such a textbook would require heavy initial investment, but would have large eventual worldwide sales, because it would not quickly become out of date.

This seems to me to be a project for a joint venture between a profit-making publishing house and a foundation. It seems important to bring in a profit-making publishing house because the textbook or text series will be successful (even educationally) only if it eventually sells enormously well.

It is, however, probably essential that a foundation make the initial investment—for the same reason as quoted earlier from one of the experts whom I consulted before writing this paper: "If the ancients had had our accountants, they would not have invented the phonetic alphabet, because it would take at least 25 years to pay off, and meanwhile nobody could explain to accountants precisely what an invention that would take 25 years was supposed to do." But any firm which had drawn a royalty every time the

phonetic alphabet was used over the course of the last three millennia would have become rather rich.

My own recommendations for the project would run something like this.

1. The Sloan Foundation to collect a team to write the textbook or text series required. The head of the team—and the "editor" of the team—to be paid a salary, plus (from the start) a contract which allows him some part of the royalty from the eventual sales. The others to be paid a salary only for the first year.

2. At the end of the first year, those who want to stay on to opt whether they wish to be recompensed eventually on a royalty or still simply on a salary or (for reduced salary) partly on both. The team head and the editor to recommend which contracts to renew, which bids to accept, which conditionally to accept, and which to refuse.

3. After two and one-half years the draft so far to be submitted to as many educational publishers as possible. If no bids are made which would pay all costs from the end of year three onwards, the project (or the team) is a failure. Discontinue it immediately. If lots of such bids are forthcoming, negotiate to make a contract on the best bid.

4. Negotiations could take the form of either (a) seeing that royalties, as well as paying back the initial investment, bring a profit to the Sloan Foundation; or (b) ensuring that the publishing firm agrees that, after paying back Sloan's costs and giving the publishing firm itself a certain (large) profit, the textbook should be sold at marginal cost price to the educational system thereafter. My own ideological preference is for profit-making alternative (a). If I were a foundation executive, my preference might be for publicity-attracting alternative (b).

Either system could set a new trend for nonprofit foundations.

### *Summary*

My main recommendations are therefore:

1. It is desirable that "English" courses are divided into "American Language" and "English Literature" courses (under these or some other less emotive names).

2. It is recommended that the Sloan Foundation subsidize some university workshops to devise experimental curricula for American Language courses.

3. The grants should run initially for only a few years. They should be continued for a few more years if these workshops then evolve into teacher-training courses (either full-time or outpatient) for American Language teachers.

4. The American Language courses concerned should be what are misleadingly called "closed teaching systems" rather than "open learning systems"—for example, they should be testable and accessible by "pass" or "fail" examination results.

5. Provided that point four above is recognized, the attempt at creating "American Language" courses as parts of a curriculum reform should be highly experimental. A wide variety of curriculum reform programs is likely to be more valuable than any attempt to create at one leap a national curriculum reform.

6. The most valuable investment might be in setting up a team to produce a textbook or text series for "American Language Courses" or "Expository Writing." This should eventually (and desirably) be a major profit-making venture, but it needs initial investment. Various ways have been suggested through which a nonprofit foundation might best cooperate with a commercial publisher.

# V

## *A Response to Norman Macrae*

**Donald L. M. Blackmer**

*The paper by Norman Macrae was sent by Arthur L. Singer, Jr., vice president of the Sloan Foundation, to a number of people for their reaction. Some interesting comments were received, among them this one, a letter to Mr. Singer from Donald L. M. Blackmer, a political scientist at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology and associate dean of the School of Humanities and Social Science.*

You asked for my views on Norman Macrae's paper, which I've read with interest. As you know, I'm no expert on the writing problem—just an interested observer with a particularly intensive recent experience, which is no doubt the perfect basis for developing opinions, but not necessarily wisdom. Anyhow, I felt moved to respond, and you can supply the salt.

Overall, I find Macrae's piece at times stimulating, at times irritating. It is written with the clarity, conviction, and confidence of someone who knows a great deal about one part of his subject (writing itself), but who has had, I would judge, a good deal less experience with another part (the teaching of writing, and the institutions where it is done). The end impression I come away with is that Macrae is a forceful advocate of particular positions in a debate that is more complicated and many-sided than he acknowledges. (No doubt that's just what he was asked to do.) Here are some more particular reactions to certain of his proposals.

1. I wish that Macrae had been more explicit about the level at which a national effort is most urgently needed and could have the greatest effect. The part of the problem he is dealing with—which

boils down to the development of a kind of basic competence in expository writing—is not, or should not be, the primary task of the university. To the extent that colleges have had to perform that task, as an essentially remedial function, they have often in fact made precisely the kind of separation between Literature and Expository Writing he is urging them to make. That's why Writing Programs have come into being. The typical freshman English course seems to me a good deal more oriented toward writing in Macrae's preferred sense than toward the study of literature.

I cannot, however, share his apparently unequivocal enthusiasm for dividing the *teachers* of these two subjects into two distinct groups, on the grounds that teachers of literature are too enamored of belles lettres and elegant writing to do the more straightforward job of teaching expository writing. Some are, of course, and they shouldn't be asked to teach basic writing courses. But I've heard of several reasonably successful English departments where most of the faculty is expected to do both. And we all know the danger, when writing teachers are segregated into special writing programs, that the teachers end up feeling like marginal, second-class citizens because the teaching of a skill like writing, or foreign languages, or what have you, is not in and of itself an activity that tends to be highly respected in the university environment. So I wouldn't want to see a useful distinction of functions, and of people, carried too far. My more general point is that some careful differentiation needs to be made between secondary and higher education; Macrae's paper tends to blur the difference.

2. As for secondary schools, I wonder if Macrae is really on target in identifying as a key problem the propensity of English teachers "to teach fine writing, allusive writing, writing which stimulates feelings and ideas . . . writing which includes beautiful ambiguities." Sure, the best teachers in the advanced sections of upper-level English in the best high schools naturally do as much as they can of that sort of thing, and more power to them. But is that really a sharp portrait of what is going on in the ordinary English class in the ordinary high school? Is it a solid explanation of the failure of the school system to turn out decent writers? I may underestimate Macrae's point, and I'm quite willing to believe that it's a contributory factor, but I doubt that the answer lies in the implied remedy of substituting "American Language majors" for English majors as the pool from which teaching talent is drawn

for the high schools. To pin primary responsibility on the teachers is unfair, unless at the same time one tries to look at the total environment in the schools where they teach (and in the society as a whole, for that matter). Macrae does some of that, but doesn't give it the weight I think it deserves.

3. This last point seems to me relevant to the textbook question. Macrae argues that teachers don't want textbooks on expository writing because it's a hard subject to teach and to grade, and in general requires more work. Since the teachers don't want the texts, school systems don't buy them and publishers can't afford to produce them. He then goes on to argue that what you need to do is to "prime the pump" with a major foundation investment. This seems to me something of a non sequitur unless it's accompanied by some plausible suggestions as to how the motivations and incentives of those in the schools—the teachers, the administrators, the students—can be changed so as to make them more receptive to such texts. The central fact seems to me not that we do not know how to teach writing because we haven't yet agreed on the best way—which presumably a new textbook series based on university research will help to do—but that we do not teach writing well because school systems are not willing or able to give it high enough priority.

The suggestion of separating "English" from "writing" in the curriculum—even beginning in primary school—may be an excellent one, for it would focus attention at every stage of the educational process on the distinct and special importance of writing as a skill. But that raises a big question of priorities in a curriculum which, at all levels, is constantly under pressure to leave more time for music, art, history, language, and all manner of other good things. Maybe the motivation does exist by this time, now that the "writing problem" has become a matter of open national concern, so that school systems would eagerly adopt a prestigious textbook series and new curricula. I certainly don't know the answer, but I wouldn't want to invest in a big textbook project until I knew more than I do (or than Macrae's piece suggests he does) about the motives and circumstances and pressures that influence the choices of people in primary and secondary school systems. If teachers aren't teaching writing, it can't be just because they're lazy or because there isn't a good textbook at hand.

4. What I like best about Macrae's paper is the emphasis, especially toward the end, on primary eduction. The quotations from

George Miller's letter suggest some really exciting possibilities both for research and for development of new ways of teaching about language. It seems to me beyond question that the "writing problem" ought to be looked at, much more self-consciously than I gather has usually been done, as a "language learning problem," and that particularly strong attention should be given to the early grades. Is there something to be learned here from the "new math" experience? Both Miller's comments and the down-to-earth observations of the *unidentified* Sloan Foundation senior officer stress in their different ways the obvious fact that learning to write is in large part learning to think. Surely this is something about which a group of linguists, language teachers, psychologists, and writing teachers would have something to say. My private guess would be that if there is to be a research effort, with syllabi and curricula as the end result, the effort should concentrate first at the elementary level. In due course the nature of the problem for the secondary schools and the colleges would be changed and a new breed of teachers would begin to appear.

5. Finally, there's a terribly obvious point that Macrae's piece seems to me not to stress enough. That is, very simply, the crucial importance, especially in the secondary school and college, of getting students to write as often and as much as possible—about almost anything. From my perspective Macrae goes a bit overboard in his enthusiasm for "unambiguous expository writing" and for "closed learning systems." Sure, students ought to be able to explain how to repair a bicycle so that an ignoramus can understand. But the system can tolerate only a certain amount of that kind of prose—my system at any rate—and I think it would be a mistake to limit the ambitions of teachers and students to that level, if only out of fear that both parties would quickly become unutterably bored with the process. There are students, after all, who may have things they want to write about which cannot be summed up under the rubric of expository prose. It seems to me just as important to learn to communicate (and thereby to identify, locate, acknowledge) one's feelings about other people or about one's situation in life, or to describe effectively something one has seen or done, in a form or style I would not call expository.

I'm afraid I feel rather the same way about the proposed course in expository writing based on learning how to outline a subject. I would do something very much like that myself if I were teaching

a course—it's my kind of writing too, and I put a higher premium than many on clarity of thought and expression—but I'd hate to wait until January before I let the students do any of their own writing. And I also wouldn't like to discourage them from experimenting with kinds of writing which don't lend themselves very well to the outlining technique. I've just been trying to imagine how I would outline a description of the Vermont scene in front of me at this moment; I think I'd do better just to start writing, and let the piece find its order "by itself" as I worked it over.

I've been fighting at M.I.T. for *more* expository writing, but one can go too far. If the goal of learning to write is construed as narrowly as Macrae seems to do, it becomes more constricting than seems to me to make sense. I am all for a course or two with that particular objective, just as M.I.T. badly needs courses in science and technical writing as particular forms of expository writing. But the thought of developing an entire curriculum at the secondary school level organized around the goal of one particular kind of writing, however useful, seems to me questionable. How about a more broadly stated objective—to learn how to communicate clearly in writing one's knowledge, ideas, feelings, and experiences, or something equally prosaic—which allows for a good deal more flexibility in the kinds of writing that one values and therefore the kinds of teaching one encourages. I won't elaborate on it, but I also feel that the "open learning/closed learning" dichotomy is dealt with in too pat a way; elements of both styles are important and necessary, depending on where particular students are at and what you want to teach them to write about.

So here I am trying to complicate the picture. The fact is that there don't seem to be any simple answers. I enjoyed reading and thinking about Macrae's piece, but I do feel that in the heroic effort to make sense of the whole mess, from his fairly distant vantage point, he has oversimplified some things more than he has clarified them. At least that's how it looks from here.

# VI

## *Some Comments from the Field*

*The five preceding papers were sent by the Foundation to a number of experienced public school teachers. Although their comments cannot be reproduced here in full, excerpts from the critiques of three of these teachers appear below, with their permission. The first commentator is Jayne Karsten, head of the English department of Langley High School in McLean, Virginia, who for the last 25 years has been a teacher of expository writing in the middle school, the high school, and college. The second is Richard W. Hatch, now retired, whose career spanned 25 years as a teacher of English in public and private secondary schools and another 15 years in the editing and production of books on scholarly and academic subjects; he is also a novelist and poet. The third commentary is from Dante Peter Ciochetto, who teaches in the public schools of Westport, Connecticut, and whose 30 years of experience in the teaching of English has been gained in many types of schools and with students of widely different ability and background. A fourth and final comment, reproduced below, came to the Foundation from Theodore R. Sizer, not in response to any of the other selections in this Occasional Paper, but as a letter informally discussing the results of a grant made to his school in the spring of 1977. Mr. Sizer is headmaster of Phillips Academy/Andover and before that was dean of the Harvard Graduate School of Education.*

### Jayne Karsten

As several of your contributors point out, the problem of bad writing by students is hardly new; it might be added that an

attempt to correct the problem is hardly new either. After Sputnik, it was attacked in dramatic fashion. English teachers mobilized, with the help of the Commission on English, to improve their discipline. (In fact, there used to be a joke among teachers of that vintage that English-teacher time should be measured in B.D. and A.D.—Before and After Dartmouth—a key conference on writing that was called in the aftermath of Sputnik.) The "new rhetoric," actually a repackaging of the old, began to catch on in English classrooms, where it counted. But with the upheaval of the 1960's, the upswing was halted. The "highly elective curriculum" cited in the preceding selections emerged in the public schools, as did the problems mentioned by Albert Bowker of declining attendance, homework, and basic skills. Six- and nine-week "electives," often with "soft" courses, took over at the high school level and the modular system invaded many junior high schools. There were some good results, temporarily—increased student motivation in English classes and broadened teacher experience in literature—but the drive to reform the teaching of writing suffered a severe setback. Too much teacher energy was used in trying to find exotic material to attract students to elective courses and in trying to grasp names and faces in the stream of new students coming into English classes. . .

I question some of the prescriptions offered in the papers sent me. For instance, I would worry a great deal—and Donald Blackmer seems to worry too—about committing American school systems too heavily to Norman Macrae's American Language courses, *per se*. I add "*per se*" because I respect greatly the premise he builds as he quotes Gordon Thompson: In a nation where "half the working population . . . is employed in pushing pieces of information around," something must be done to upgrade the "pushing" performance. But isolated doses of "American Language" can be sterile and self-defeating, and eventually can thwart the growth of power in expository writing. Although we want to develop students who can explain clearly how the Ultra-Ban is moving, we want also to develop students with enough language power and rhetorical facility to get it moving.

I would not separate "lucid expository writing" too formally from "fine" writing, or "fine" writing from "lucid expository prose." I would bring both types into all students' experience, sometimes exercising the basic expository skills heavily, sometimes giving

students a chance to write freely. For writing is a self-fulfilling process (some say, a self-creating process) as well as a marketable skill. The writing classroom should give attention to both dimensions.

I would hope, also, that any university research would not get trapped in one aspect (language) or one level (elementary vs. secondary) but would attack the problem from a panoramic view. Donald Blackmer expresses enthusiasm for emphasis on primary education and certainly, as he suggests, "particularly strong attention should be given to the early grades." But from my experience, it seems that one factor leading to our present dilemma is that we have concentrated large sums of money and great energy throughout the years on This and then That, but we have seldom tried to pull together IT. In fact, to me, one of the most obvious reasons for breakdown in the present situation is that, at least in the public schools, the right hand often does not understand what the left hand is doing. Many teachers know how to teach writing at a particular level. What they perhaps do not know is how their emphases and goals fit into the sustained experience of students from pre-kindergarten through the college level. What we need out of research is a vigorous, definitive probe of how language, experience, and thought processes hinge and of what sequential implications are involved in the classroom development of this interaction. I would urge, also, that any university research be soundly underpinned with counsel from the real world of the elementary and secondary schools.

Through the years, I have reached some firm conclusions about what works and what does not work in the writing classroom. The heart of it all is locked into Stephen White's statement, "anyone who sets out to write expository prose goes through several stages." My loudest "amen" came as I read Mr. White's definition of these stages: indeed, the amen was joined with an hallelujah chorus!

Writing is a process, an extension of the mind's action as it experiences, internalizes, feels, recalls, sorts, packages, and refines thought and experience through language. An effective writing program must address itself to this complex formula.

Such a commitment is extremely difficult, particularly at the pre-college level. The difficulty is compounded by some of the elements of distortion mentioned earlier: overemphasis on rules of grammar and mechanics; lack of understanding of the far-reaching goals; lack of definition of specific sequential goals. To get beyond these

obstacles, a national program should be developed that focuses vigorously on the teaching of writing as a *process*. Such a program would research, model, and disseminate information about how the process should be taught. . . . For, although the steps in the process can be taught at the college level, in one contained package as a formula for writing a theme, (a good Freshman English course on writing could follow Stephen White's formula exactly), they need to be opened out over a long period of time at the pre-college level, particularly if the larger goals of sharpening reading skills and critical thought processes and of texturing and enriching language are to be achieved.

For instance, experience in the basic elements of composition, such as focusing to a main point; interrelating part to part; and analyzing coordination, emphasis and subordination—all can begin in kindergarten (couched in simple, empirical terms, of course), be clarified and reinforced through primary school and junior high, then formally abstracted and refined, at least in some degree, at the high school level. The progression would follow Stephen White's sequence, in recurring cycles, of structuring, extending, and refining. It would involve sensitive interplay of freedom and discipline; it would use open "creative" exercises that build power in language, syntax, and ideas; structuring exercises that strengthen organization through classifying, categorizing, constructing theses, analyzing logical relationships, formally outlining; expanding exercises that encourage substantive support; rhetorical exercises that sharpen proportion, parallelism, figurative language, openings and closings. . . .

**Richard W. Hatch**

For the contemporary high school student, who is not bound by the limits of a home, school, and neighborhood environment, a powerful influence on his own motivation comes from his perception of society at large and of the outside world. The communications revolution, offering him an unending flow of national and world news and popular entertainment in its most dramatic form—pictures and comment—has instilled in him an awareness of society that once was not acquired by young people until their twenties.

Even the telephone has had its effects on writing: not only has it made personal correspondence a lost art; it has eliminated the necessity for thousands of business letters. Today the executive who must have discussions with distant branch and subsidiary officers

holds a telephone conference with all of them simultaneously, issuing directives and even getting reports without leaving his own desk. He also has closed-circuit television available.

The computer is inescapable as well. The engineer who must "sell" his bridge design or highway plan, the architect with his design for a special-purpose building, the sales manager who would open up a new market area, even the town planner—all of whom would once have had to produce convincing exposition—now go to the decision makers armed with a computer print-out. . . .

But let us assume we have a motivated student and a qualified teacher. It is my conviction as the author of novels and both magazine fiction and expository articles (here using the term "writer" to refer both to the author and to the professional or business individual whose work requires the possession of advanced skill in expository writing) that no writer is ever *taught* to write. He learns by writing and writing and writing. At the high school level texts and teachers are vital as guides, helpers, encouragers—but still adjuncts to the making of a writer.

It is certainly possible to create, as recommended in Mr. Macrae's paper, a textbook that would be a great aid to the high school student learning expository writing. It would start with a lucid statement that defined expository writing and discussed the reasons for learning and the uses of expository writing. It would stress the necessity of the outline and furnish at least one example of a complete outline and the expository essay based on that outline. It would contain several model expositions with an analysis of each specifically aimed at identifying the elements of clarity, order, and logic. . . .

The wide reader is not necessarily a writer, but the writer is always a wide reader. The writing of exposition should not be a separate course. There must be no divorce of expository writing from the study of literature and the assignment of outside reading. Both stimulate broad interest in learning and should be concurrent with the work in writing. Both provide endless opportunities for discussion in the form of oral exposition in class that relates to expository-writing skill; and both offer a wide range of subjects for writing assignments. The fundamental functions of every teacher are of course to teach basic rules, to lecture, to demonstrate, to stimulate interest, to initiate and guide classroom discussion, and so on. Our qualified teacher of a class learning the skill of any

advanced writing, creative or expository, has a special all-important function.

The student we are concerned with should write a 500-word exposition each week in his high school senior year. The correction of those papers cannot be a simple matter of grading in the A B C manner with a brief comment. No advanced writing may be treated that way if the returned paper is to have any effect on the student's skill. Any comment, to be effective, must be directed specifically at and discuss in some detail language, order, emphasis, and, emphatically, logic. Thus any effective written comment must be an essay in itself.

No general lecture to the class on the errors and shortcomings in the week's batch of papers will serve. I learned long ago that the student is not interested in the mistakes of anyone else's paper. He is interested only in his own brain-child.

The teacher can put on the blackboard a title and under it the topic sentences in perfect logical order of all the paragraphs required to reach the conclusion stated in the last topic sentence. He can then require each student to write an expository essay using verbatim every provided topic sentence in the exact order given and reach the given conclusion. Will the resulting identically patterned papers be susceptible to a common formula for correction so that the teacher can address the necessary comments and discussion to the whole class? Never. Each paper will be the unique product of a unique student no matter what the common theme and organization. Moreover, when it comes to logic, the critical essence of exposition, the intellectual process of logical thinking is developed and given written form uniquely by every individual.

In short, there is no such thing as a teaching device or technique that will elicit from the student expository writing that is easy to correct, or a system of correction and comment that will be effective in enhancing the student's skill and can be an all-class operation.

The crucial truth that applies to learning the advanced skill of expository writing is that there is absolutely no substitute for the personal detailed discussion between teacher and individual student. How to make that possible in a mass system of public education is perhaps the greatest challenge that will confront the Sloan Foundation should it decide to establish a program in the teaching of expository writing.

## Dante Peter Ciochetto

In a teaching career of more than three decades in classrooms ranging geographically from the rural Midwest, to the inner city of the Far West, to the affluent suburbs of the Northeast, and ranging demographically from 12-year-old seventh graders to adults entering college after retiring from the armed forces, I can remember no time when the state of student writing has not been cause for dismay. It does not follow, however, as one commentator claims, that "there is nothing new here." The dismay is deeper now and much more widespread, and the evidences which give rise to that dismay more compelling.

There is no deep mystery about most of the causes for the deterioration of writing skills in the schools. Those causes have been given some attention in this Occasional Paper. However, my daily exposure to the problems of student writing may well make my emphases somewhat different from those of other contributors. From the viewpoint of the teacher in secondary schools, the major problems in the teaching of writing are: (1) the influence of the communications media; (2) bad or non-existent teaching of writing; (3) insufficient time allotted for the teaching of writing; (4) the difficulties of evaluating student writing; and (5) the lack of a sound sequential writing program for the schools. The categories are not exhaustive and they overlap with one another, but they will serve.

*The influence of the media.* Television viewing habits of children and adolescents are frequently cited as a cause for poor writing because they remove the *need* for written communication, and because they discourage wide reading. The first part of the argument is specious—there never has been a pressing need for the very young in our society to write competently. The charge that television-viewing gets in the way of wide reading, and thereby deprives children of experience with language for later writing, has more substance.

But that is only part of the problem. Television and radio in all their programming—regular, special, news commentary, and especially in advertising—consistently and flagrantly abuse the English language. The exposure to the lack of distinction among word-meanings, improper idioms, faulty grammatical constructions, and incomplete rhetorical structures makes its mark upon the language that the child internalizes. The mark is there when the child later

attempts to transcribe his language in writing. The teacher who cares about these distinctions, as any competent teacher of expository writing must, has then to teach language first, along with the writing conventions and mechanics. The situation does not leave much time for what the textbooks customarily call unity, coherence, and emphasis. Unlearning, as the PSSC physicists pointed out, is a long, slow process.

Additionally, the influence of the media and of the youth culture has spread into adult life, hastening the corruption of language to the extent that even the fairly relaxed guardians of language purity find themselves no longer "with it."

*Bad or non-existent teaching of expository writing.* Bad teaching exists, and even the best of teachers makes an occasional bad job of it. The worst offender is not often the teacher who fails to make a distinction between "fine" writing and competent expository prose —some good can come of ordering the thought processes, however impressionistic, especially if the teacher can write competently in either mode. In English classrooms, the villains are (a) teachers who have wearied of the process and, without comment or suggestion, return papers marked A or B (seldom C) with the attendant plusses or minuses; (b) those who teach only grammar—American school or transformational—under the guise of composition; and (c) those who assign no writing at all because in our "global village" everything is oral. Less culpable, but infinitely more damaging to student writing and to attitudes towards it, are those school people outside the English classroom who reinforce bad writing by reward and example.

If a student knows, and he does soon enough, that his social studies teacher gives an A for any report that is ten or more pages long and that he doesn't "count" mechanics or usage, the student will consistently turn in ten pages, be it of nothing. The teacher will argue that the teaching of writing is not his concern, that it detracts from the aims and purposes of his "subject" to be picky about writing and writing conventions. In a confrontation, he will admit that clarity of thought is important to his subject but assert that clear transcription of that thinking is the job of the English teacher. What can he do if the students can't write?

Even more demoralizing, and in the end probably even more damaging, is the up-the-down-staircase rhetoric emanating from

the higher offices of the school. Whether the various administrative memoranda reach the classroom through the medium of the two-way public address system, or through the purple, gray, or black-on-white sheet of paper, they invariably prove that lack of conciseness, coherence, or cogency is not a deterrent to success at the administrative levels of school management. In the early 1960's two members of the National Council of Teachers of English conducted a study of good high school English departments, selected on the basis of winners of the NCTE writing awards. One of their conclusions was that the key to a good English program was a school principal who was committed to such a program and who was supportive of the aims of the English department. That conclusion may be worth some attention if programs for better school writing are contemplated.

*Insufficient time allotted for the teaching of writing.* This is an old, old song sung to a hackneyed tune, but unless a prospective program can surmount the time problem, it is doomed from the start. Assume a minimum of 100 students a week (125 or more in the junior high school) and one paper of 250 words per student. The teacher is faced with the necessity of reading 25,000 words, responding to 100 different ideas, noting hundreds of mechanical errors in spelling, punctuation, sentence structure, and usage, examing structure and sequence, and finally commenting in twenty-five or fifty words of his own. In addition, he must prepare approaches to the literature text as well as test and evaluate student performance in all of the other disparate areas of the language arts. He must also respond to the requests of parents, attend various meetings, bear his share of the multitudinous non-teaching assignments in the school, and hold the attention of his students for several hours each day. If English teachers in the secondary schools make the mechanics of writing, rather than the development and presentation of ideas, the critical aspect of success in writing, they have alibis enough.

*The difficulties of evaluating student writing.* Any discussion of the evaluation of student writing overlaps both the foregoing and subsequent problem areas, but in certain respects this sensitive area must be considered separately. Just as the English teacher has very little to say about the writing competence of the students who come

to him, he has no firm basis to insist upon certain specific competencies for the students he passes on. He may agree to teach certain items, vaguely formulated in some syllabus for his grade and level, but ordinarily he refuses to accept the responsibility for his students' learning those items. If the teacher insists on some standards of performance, he must be prepared to defend himself against the protests of parents and the negative evaluation of his supervisor or principal. Until programs in composition establish clear requirements for expository writing and workable systems for evaluating the mastery of these requirements, and until the community and school authorities agree to these requirements, all a teacher can do is to "expose" his students to certain skills; he cannot insist upon their being learned. So he shrugs the student on to the next level.

*The lack of a sound sequential writing program for the schools.* Writing is developmental. There should be a discoverable order to the difficulty of the skills to be mastered in reaching a minimum level of competency in putting one's simplest thoughts in clear and logical prose. The order has not been discovered; so far as I know, there has been little real attempt to discover it. Language textbooks come in series and usually devote a few chapters to the teaching of composition. Some of the material is useful; much more is not; almost none of it is interesting. From one level to the next there is repetition and expansion, more padding than sequence. The books are expensive; the models for composition, limited and flat. What recommended sequential writing programs have reached print (and there were several in the late 1950's and early 1960's) were brief, empirically arrived at, and aimed at academically talented students. It was the heyday of Advanced Placement. These programs, whether they appeared as articles in the *English Journal* or as chapters in books on the high school curriculum, contained little that was specific and no material that could be adapted for use in the classroom. For the most part, too, they assumed a student body that had mastered the basic mechanics of language expression and were ready for greater things. Perhaps for that era, their assumptions were largely correct; one cannot make those assumptions today for even the "above average" high school entrant.

Meanwhile, the search for a culprit grows and sensitive scalps in the classrooms begin to tingle a bit, but no one really knows just

what to do. The occasional school has taken measures: demanding more classroom writing; putting a little more money into the English program for the employment of lay readers; in rare cases lightening the load of the English teachers and providing time for individual conferences with students. But the efforts have proved largely ineffective despite an occasional gleam of success.

What is to be done?

All of the deficiences of the school writing programs cannot be attacked simultaneously: some call for immediate attempts at remediation; others must await the results of extensive experimentation and study, and the preparation of materials based upon the results of that study. There are school districts that would be willing to make a considerable investment in a writing program if they could have reasonable assurance of results, but they need the kind of leadership a foundation can provide. What could a foundation do?

It seems to me a two-fold program is needed: first, a wide-spread but short-term intensive program (in the jargon of the day, a "crash" program) aimed at setting some standards for expository writing in the high school and for improving the effectiveness of high school teachers of writing; and second, a long-term program, based upon experimentation and the study of writing, to begin as early as possible in the elementary schools and eventually making the crash program unnecessary. Neither program would necessitate the division of English into language and literature, as recommended by Norman Macrae. Most writing in the schools *about* literature is expository and is done neither better nor worse than other expository writing; so I hope expository writing is not to be as narrowly conceived as it seems to be by Mr. Macrae.

In the first program, at the start, teachers and consultants would meet to set clear standards of achievement for recognized competency in expository writing. These standards might, at first, be somewhat arbitrary. The danger of their being too much so could be lessened if they were arrived at somewhat in the manner in which ground rules are established for grading the 20-minute essay of the College Entrance Examination Board. Concurrently, writing-competence workshops for teachers would be established to examine and interpret the standards and to devise strategies for introducing them into the classroom and for helping students to meet them. Conjointly, and this is where the money counts, a

corps of readers must be recruited and trained whose only job would be to read, correct, and respond to students' written and re-written work.

For such a program to make any headway against the press of current problems, whole schools and school systems must be involved. Commitments must be made by boards of education to full-term programs (three to five years). Administrative personnel and teachers must agree that they want to participate, and they must be willing to make adjustments in the teaching programs and to assure the best chances of success for the experiment. If a small number of prestigious or strategically located schools can demonstrate the workability of such a program and justify its cost, other schools that want and need it will adopt it. Perhaps just one indication of success with the program, such as improved SAT scores, would be enough to arouse interest.

The second, or long-term, program should be designed to eliminate the deficiencies in basic writing skills before the student reaches the high school. Ideally, it would demonstrate that the teaching of expository writing whether for future education or for work was a possibility for districts willing to expend certain kinds of time, effort, and money. A three-stage, articulated program would be essential.

1. At the elementary and intermediate school levels, students would learn the language skills appropriate for those grades and would be given time to practice those skills. If research supports the placement, these early years would find the child learning to make some distinctions in word choice, learning to spell accurately, learning to construct sentences, and learning to put several sentences on a common theme together. The emphasis would be on language sensitivity and on the exciting possibilities of language. Above all, the child must be encouraged to take pride in work well done and to assume responsibility for careless work.

2. In the junior high school the student must be brought to an understanding of the basic mechanical devices of writing. He must achieve some competence in grammatical usage, punctuation, and outlining. He must have some idea of the structure of paragraphs and must learn some of the simpler methods of paragraph development. He should examine a great number of model paragraphs and write a great many himself.

3. In high school, the student should achieve competence in the various forms of exposition—giving instructions, preparing short and long reports, presenting research, writing summaries and precis, presenting and explaining a point of view or idea. He should be writing as much as possible in all of his courses.

If the program is to succeed, teachers must be required to demonstrate proficiency in writing so that they can recognize and reward it and offer suggestions and criticism. Written work in all high school courses should meet the minimum requirements for effectiveness established by the school. Forms of reporting necessary for proper communication in a specific discpiline should be taught or reviewed by the teacher of that discipline. There is nothing really new here except perhaps the insistence that the classroom is not the teacher's castle unless his students meet the standards which he will have helped to set and the fact that he will have trained help available to him.

The ability to write effective exposition is not a gift; it is a skill that can be learned. Admittedly, it is easier for some students than others, but if the aim remains "effective" rather than "elegant," the students in the upper levels of the high school should be able to make themselves clearly understood in simple prose. They can be taught to do so if the school and the community want them to.

**Theodore R. Sizer**

With support from the Sloan Foundation, the Andover Committee met for two weeks last summer on the subject of writing skills. It also tried to produce a plan of action for your consideration at the Foundation. What the Committee recommended is the creation of a center at Andover to forward work toward the solutions to this "problem of writing." Embedded in the recommendation is a set of principles which struck me, as an outsider and writing-teacher *manque*, as deserving of repetition in this letter.

Writing is the expression of thought in language. If thought is fuzzy, so is language; only clear thought has the chance of clear exposition. Vacuity can be made eloquent, as politicians from the days of Bryan have known all too well, but readers of insurance policies also know how simple, clear ideas can be easily obfuscated. A teacher of writing has to be a teacher of thinking, of argument, logic, sequence, and evidence as well as of the craft of exposition. Of course, such is so for teachers of all subjects (and thus, as the

Committee stresses, all teachers must be teachers of writing), but given the fact that the craft of writing is wholly a process—never in any important sense a body of particular facts—it is especially so for those who labor in the area conventionally defined as the field of English. As the recently published Wirtz report on a decade of decline in college board scores summarizes, "We suspect strongly that *expressing* something clearly and correctly—especially in writing—is thinking's sternest discipline."

Paradoxically, the very period for which the Wirtz Committee was finding a decline of academic effectiveness was one in which more money and energy than ever before was spent in formal curriculum-improvement efforts. In the area of writing, the Commission on English was an important source of ideas; the U. S. Office of Education's Project English underwrote many of the larger efforts. Foundations, most notably the Carnegie Corporation which supported some relatively small but influential projects, were also involved. All attracted a cadre of fine scholars and dedicated teachers, but relatively little remains to show for the activity.

Looking back, I—as one who had relatively little to do with the movement, I must quickly confess—am able to identify several possible reasons for the limited success of much well-intentioned effort. Most important has been the fragmentation of the field of English, or, to put it differently, a high level of disagreement among scholars about what should comprise the core of the area. The profound gulf between official English and popular English, between what scholars would have children read and what they do voluntarily read (if they read at all) is striking. The scholarly trade curses the gulf and urges the populace to cross it and be saved. Except for a corps of sensitive school teachers, rarely do English scholars probe the reasons for the gulf in the first place, or consider starting with the problems of writing and of reading, where the children are, rather than where university English departments are. In a word, the scholars in the field—the potential leaders of conventional curriculum reform comparable with the Jerrold Zachariases, Bentley Glasses and Edward Begles—are remote from the realities of mass culture and of school needs, and thus have given and yet give lamentably little informed and sustained leadership. The field of writing, and of English generally, lacks both focus and a clear and useful link to modern culture.

A second problem has to do with practicality. My experience

from working on school reform in the humanities in general has been to find a strikingly obtuse unwillingness by scholars and teachers to compromise on anything. The bugaboo of "standards" is frequently raised: "If we can't have x, then *any* attempt at improvement of the course of study will fail." Any effort at transfusing an improvement into the craft of teaching across American schools will inevitably involve heroic compromises. True reform will come, if at all, in little pieces, in increments, almost only by generations. One builds a hut before the World Trade Center. Too often humanists are so offended by the angularities and imperfections of huts that they refuse to try to build anything. The heart of any strategy for school reform is focus, and the soul patience. Humanists too often have lacked both.

Related to this issue of practicality are the questions surrounding the diffusion of improved teaching methods, and these will be especially apparent in the area of writing. The contrast with high school physics is enlightening: virtually 100 percent of American high school students take some form of English, or at least one course which requires writing; less than five percent of these students study physics. The number of physics teachers in American schools is workable, a corps of but several tens of thousands. The number of English teachers (not to mention those instructors of other subjects who should be teaching writing within their milieu) whom it is essential to reach if reform is to take place is in the hundreds of thousands. The strategy of reform in this area will have to be exceedingly well drawn. The problem of diffusion, the costs involved, and the time needed to achieve anything measurable have been consistently underestimated by most of those working in the humanities, the exception in English being persons such as Paul Olson of Nebraska and Harold Martin, now of Williams.

Finally, English curriculum reform lacked and still lacks a unifying theme, or in the pejorative, a "gimmick." For a while in the 1960's, transformational grammar was a potential "answer," and the Oregon project under Kitzhaber labored on this. It failed to provide a unifying theme, or even a fruitful entrance point to the area, at least in the view of Wayne O'Neil of M.I.T., one of the few first-class scholars of linguistics who seriously taught in the schools. There seem to be few intellectually uncomplex structures upon which to build a curriculum in writing for children.

Given this fact, it is no surprise that the Andover Committee

does not recommend a curriculum-development effort analogous to those launched in the 1960's by the Physical Science Study Committee, the School Mathematics Study Group or even Project English. Rather, it recommends as the prime focus what can best be described as a teacher-training effort. This is so as the process of learning to write well is fundamentally interactive, a dialogue between teacher and taught. The particular substance involved is far less important than it would be, say, in physics. At its best, writing is a craft, a skill, a *process;* the messages each writer makes can vary greatly from those of everyone else. Substance is important, but it is idiosyncratic: the material about which a teacher persuades a particular student to write is selected not as an item of fact germane to general education but, rather, as a vehicle with which to learn clarity, grace, and personal style. As I write this, I can feel Jerrold Zacharias rumbling in protest: science too is such a process. But I retort that while this is so, there are differences in degree among subjects. Process is but a part of the learning of physical science, and the "coverage" of certain critical substantive areas is also a legitimately critical part. These latter are effectively approached through a curriculum for students, one which builds in a systematic general pedagogy for learning of scientific process.

Given the fact that interaction among individuals is fundamental for the teaching of writing, the "curriculum" to be "developed" is a curriculum *for teachers*, rather than for students. The National Center which the Committee envisions has two primary functions: to serve as a collection, analysis, and development center for the many "right" ways of teaching writing and learning to write, and as a site to train master teachers—who would themselves create "sites" in their home regions to pass these "right ways" along. What is envisioned is a network, the generator for which would be the Andover Center.

You will note that the Committee identified no "one way" to teach writing. Indeed, there were various approaches represented by their advocates within the group, and considerable discussion of several sets of techniques used in classrooms. Given the importance of student-teacher interaction, and the inevitability of wide differences in personality and style among teachers and students in this process of interaction, a plan to evolve "one best way" is probably as wrong-headed as it is difficult. None the less there are

better ways and worse ways, approaches that work more or less effectively than others. Some score with older pupils, or precocious pupils, or hostile pupils. Some work best with extroverted teachers, others with introverted. A function of the proposed center would be to assemble and to develop descriptions, examples and materials from a variety of "right ways" to teach writing, from which teachers ultimately could select, or be provoked to develop their own variant. This isn't purely one hundred flowers blooming: the center will make judgments about more and less effective approaches and materials, and will take firm positions in support of these. And it, as the report outlines, will insist that teachers "have a firm sense of the mental operations that initiate, characterize, and define the writing process: those acts of evoking, gathering, sorting, and asserting pieces of information and arranging them in coherent patterns."

Answers to some of the practical issues will follow, as a set of "best ways" emerges and become classified. Most difficult to crack will be the problem of the load of students on each teacher. Clear writing emerges from a Socratic dialogue between drafter and critic, argument which sharpens thought and refines its expression. Such dialogue must be immediate, and it cannot be mass-produced. Writing teachers must be, at least most of the time, cabinet makers rather than carpenters. "Getting the time" can be accomplished, but it flies in the face of traditional notions about how to organize the school day, who "supervises the children" from period to period, and who is a "teacher" in the first place. For example, during the teacher shortage in the late 1950's, the Carnegie Corporation funded a variety of projects for the employment of "contract correctors," writing assistants attached to English classes. This device worked; would it be acceptable in this new day of sharply etched, negotiated professional assignments? The improvement of student writing ability will require fresh investment within schools, or at the least a rethinking of how "time" is spent by teachers and pupils. It cannot depend merely on exhortation and fresh materials pumped in from the outside, or on summer workshops alone, or on the dedication of "super teachers."